



Monster power! 11-channel Yamaha amplifier rated, p18

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Panasonic TV & Sony projector take 4K to new heights



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WELCOME

The great thing about home cinema is that it's what you make it. Beyond the obvious requirement of some sort of largescreen video display, plus speakers and a source player, you can do whatever you want.

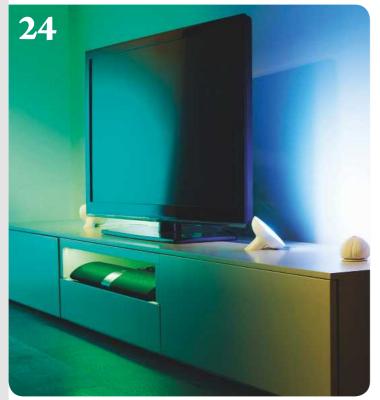


The other great thing about home cinema is that manufacturers appreciate this, and have gone into overdrive to suit every possible taste and environment. So, while Samsung will happily sell you an 85in Ultra HD TV for over £30,000, it also offers a Full HD 51in plasma for just £700 (see p72). Sony provides both stonking 4K projectors (p40) and affordable all-in-one systems (p61). And whether you want a full 5.1 speaker array (p48) or just a one-box soundbar solution (p58), the industry has that covered, too. So all you need to do is grab yourself some kit and work out what movie to watch...

> Mark Craven Editor



MENU









CONTRIBUTORS



John Archer: The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



Richard Stevenson: Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal ERT



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Adam Rayner: The UK's foremost expert in extreme audio writes about bass, hi-fi and, er, cartoons



Adrian Justins: Made his name as the editor of What Video & TV and What Home Cinema

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Robin Redbreast



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facebook.com/uk.yamaha.av http://uk.yamaha.com

BULLETIN

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Budget 5.1 systems



Audio guru JBL has introduced two affordable new speaker packages. The £300 JBL Cinema 610 Sound System features an 8in bass reflex, 100W powered subwoofer with four voice-matched satellites and a dedicated centre channel. Meanwhile, the £230 JBL Cinema 510 Sound System (pictured) opts for a smaller footprint with its combination of a 6.5in bass reflex 60W powered subwoofer and five identical satellites. http://uk.jbl.com

Freeview flagship



In the market for a new Freeview+HD set-top box? Then check out the HDR-2000T, the latest flagship model

from STB provider Humax. Priced around £180, the HDR-2000T boasts twin tuners and a 500GB HDD (good for around 300 hours of SD recordings or 125 hours of HD). In addition to over 50 Freeview channels, the device also offers a range of catch-up services and other apps via the Humax TV Portal and App Market. And, if that's still not enough content, it also supports the VuTV Pay TV streaming service. www.humaxdigital.com/uk

Soundbar solutions



Peripherals specialist CYP has launched six audio converters aimed at soundbar

users. Particularly clever is the £125 AU-11CD (pictured), which 'de-embeds' the audio stream from an HDMI signal and allows you to output it via optical digital - making it ideal for use with non-HDMI soundbars like the Sonos Playbar. Meanwhile, the AU-11HN Audio-Only HDMI Bridge (£165) works in the opposite direction, allowing optical digital or stereo analogue audio to be converted into an HDMI output.

www.cypeurope.com

PLAYLIST...

Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

GTA V (Xbox 36

Never before has a game dominated so much of Team HCC's time. To be honest, it's a miracle that there's even a magazine for you to read this month...

Fast & Furious 6



Sticking with dangerous driving, this latest Fast & Furious sequel is just as much fun – and just as good a demo disc – as its predecessor.

The Great Gatsby 3D



Spectacular stereoscopy makes this platter a must-own for any 3D AV fan and adds some much needed depth to Baz Luhrmann's film.

Dead of Night



Chills abound in the three surviving episodes of this 1972 BBC series, collected on DVD for the first time.

Crystal Lake Memories



This 420-minute doc more than lives up to its billing as being 'the complete history of Friday the 13th'.

Sonos targets mass market

New wireless speaker 'eliminates any excuse not to try music streaming'

Sonos has launched its most compact and most affordable model so far. Available to buy now priced at £169, the Play:1 marks the US company's attempt to embrace the growing mass market in wireless speakers.

At an exclusive briefing in London, Sonos' product manager, Jon Reilly, told HCC: 'With the Play: I we're eliminating any excuses that anyone might have to not try streaming music at home.' As with the other Sonos Play speakers, the Play:1 must be connected to a home network via a £39 Sonos Bridge (which in turn is connected by Ethernet to a router). Using a network rather than Bluetooth or AirPlay offers greater bandwidth with the ability to stream to additional speakers throughout the home.

The Play:1 has been designed from the ground up with a new motor in the dual-driver speaker that gives each driver a throw of 7mm, resulting in a total extrusion of 14mm. Sonos used the same design for the tweeter, which can handle lower frequencies than normal. Consequently, the crossover is 1.8KHz, which, it's claimed, gives deep bass and good off-axis performance.

Previous Sonos Play speakers featured volume and mute buttons on the top surface, but the company has changed the latter to become a play/



Jon Reilly: 'The dual-driver design of the Play:1 results in a bigger sound than expected from a small speaker'

pause function. By pressing the button the speaker instantly recommences playing whatever tune was last paused. Tapping it

twice makes the player skip to the next track in the queue (on the Sonos controller app) or – if using a streaming service such as Spotify – it skips tracks.

Instantaneous playback

'We've spent a lot time on the responsiveness of the player,' explains Reilly, 'To produce instantaneous playback we had to cache a small section of each song in the queue, this then transitions to the live stream.' Play:3 and Play:5 speakers can be modified with a software upgrade to convert the function of the current mute button to play/pause.

Other innovations include the ability to tag favourite tracks in Spotify and the provision of multi-location support, so anyone with more than one Sonos system in separate properties no longer need to reset the controller.

Reilly suggests using two Play:1s as rear speakers in conjunction with a Sonos Playbar soundbar and Sub to form a 5.1 setup. When we asked if the company would upgrade the Playbar to handle hi-res Blu-ray audio formats, Reilly's response was: 'We are

> working on network wireless solutions and would like to see TV and BD deck manufacturers take the same approach.' It could be some time, then, before Sonos really appeals to home cinema enthusiasts, but for music streaming the Play:1 looks like an enticing proposition.

The Play:1 (right) is the latest Sonos speaker

Loading...

Team *HCC*'s pick of the hottest BD and DVD news

Start your engines...



StudioCanal has revealed that it will be bringing Ron Howard's Rush to Blu-ray and DVD on January 27.

Unfortunately, there's no word on extra features or disc specifications yet for either version, but as the film is set during the golden age of Formula One racing, at the very least we're expecting something truly special from the DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack.

Stereoscopic makeover for Spielberg's dinos



Jurassic Park 3D is making a belated appearance on Blu-ray in the UK just in time for Christmas. As well

as all of the extras from the original BD release, this 3D set includes a new featurette exploring the stereoscopic conversion process.

Cartoon cavemen



Animated smash hit The Croods is arriving on DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray in the UK on December 9

courtesy of 20th Century Fox. But if you can't wait that long, the studio is also making *The Croods* available through its Digital HD download service from November 25.

Can Ultra-D tech save 3D TV?

Glasses-free 3D TV is closer than ever with SeeCubic's Ultra-D system

The success of 3D has always been hampered by the requirement to wear glasses – but the format hasn't dropped off the AV landscape just yet. The advent of 4K has provided an ideal platform for the development of glasses-free 3D, with a new system

dubbed Ultra-D about to become a commercial reality.

The 50in Ultra-D2160P-SC screen features newly refined glasses-free 3D, which has been developed by Netherlands-based SeeCubic. Lee Stephens from UK distributor Armour Home told us that 'Ultra-D addresses human depth perception in a more natural, holographic way than other 3D systems which concentrate on delivering different views to each eye by stereoscopic means.'

The Ultra-D system uses a four-layer optical lens composed of refractive and diffractive optical elements, which are bonded to an LCD screen. Sub-pixels are projected into space creating a light field, which is repeated horizontally. This produces a 3D image that is seamlessly effective from any angle

of view up to approximately 120 degrees. The light field also generates the depth information using motion parallax.

Viewing angles

The demo *HCC* was shown allowed freedom to move around without losing the 3D effect and in terms of quality the stereoscopic image appeared both bright and detailed. The vertical viewing

Lee Stephens: 'Sky has been so impressed by the technology it has been loathe to return a prototype from its HQ'

angle is a considerable 40 degrees. The horizontal resolution is somewhere between 1080p and 2160p (some of the screen's 8.3 million pixels are required for the Z axis so you can't get full 4K with 3D).

Stephens says: 'Another advantage of Ultra-D is that it can handle depth information contained within 3D Blu-rays, games and broadcast TV, plus it can convert 2D video into 3D'.

The technology will first go on sale in China under the Hisense brand but

is slated for an early 2014 release in the UK. The Ultra-D2160P-SC will sell for £5,000, with specs that include HDMI 2.0, 176-degree viewing angle, 450cd/m2 brightness and LED backlighting. The glasses-free 3D processing will be handled by a bundled set-top convertor box, but according to Stephens the ultimate aim is to develop a 3D chipset that can be built into the screen.

SeeCubic has 65in and 85in screens in the works,

with a 28in monitor also on the cards. Stephens also predicts interest from makers of games consoles and handheld devices. 'The system is also compatible with iOS, so we could certainly see a 3D iPad or iPhone,' he says, indicating that far from dying, 3D could well be on the cusp of a new lease of life.

Stereoscopic image depth can be changed via an onscreen menu



Anthem unveils next-gen AVRs

Stays committed to sound quality and leaves the extras to others

Building on the success of its firstgeneration MRX AV receivers, Anthem has taken the wraps off its latest trio.

Available now are the seven-channel MRX 710 (£2,200) and MRX 510 (£1,700), with the five-channel MRX 310 (£1,200) due in early 2014. And as with their predecessors, Anthem's newest AVRs focus purely on sound quality rather than packing in as many boxticking additional features as possible – 'If you want AirPlay, buy Apple TV,' states Anthem AV MD Alan Roser.

Enhancements to the range include additional HDMI inputs (all three models now include seven on the rear, while the MRX 710 and 510 also get a front-panel input), faster HDMI switching and 4K upscaling and pass-through. The company's award-winning ARC 1M room correction system, which uses dedicated software and a supplied, calibrated microphone, has also been further refined by Anthem's engineers for greater accuracy.

Look out for a review soon.



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Pioneer

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DIARY

Our calendar ensures that vou don't miss out...

→ NOVEMBER

18: The Wolverine

The latest *X-Men* spin-off hits DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray in the UK and finds averaged for a very specific description. finds everyone's favourite mutant battling ninjas in Japan. Snikt! www.fox.co.uk

21: Hunger Games: Catching Fire



The first Hunger Games film turned out to be a surprisingly enjoyable teen take on the *Battle* Royale concept. And

from today you can pop down to your local cinema to see how the story develops in this eagerly-awaited sequel. www.lionsgatefilms.co.uk

Microsoft Xbox One

It's been a long time coming, but the first of the next-gen games consoles finally hits UK shelves today priced at a wallet-worrying £429. But as we all know, the Xbox One isn't going to have the market to itself for long... www.xbox.com/en-GB

29: Sony PlayStation 4 ...Arriving in the UK just one week after its competitor, Sony's PS4 has had a smoother run up to release and arrives here with a comparatively affordable £349 price tag. Of course, the only way to work out which console is truly the best is to buy them both! uk.playstation.com/ps4

→ DECEMBER

02: Man of Steel

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Nope, it's just one of the year's biggest box office hits, swooping into UK stores in order to smash even more records for DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray sales. Have you pre-ordered your copy? www.warnerbros.co.uk

06: Frozen



Loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Snow Queen*, this 53rd animated feature in the Walt Disney Animated Classics series arrives in both 3D and 2D versions at UK cinemas. But which version will you be willing to stump up the cash to see? www.disney.co.uk

12: HCC #229

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews. www.homecinemachoice.com

BFI launches new VOD service

Online platform to make the full 'BFI experience' available nationwide

Following our coverage of the BFI Smart TV app a couple of months ago, HCC had no idea that it would be catching up again with the British Film Institute's Director of Digital Edward Humphrey so soon. And certainly not to discuss what BFI Chair Greg Dyke describes as being 'the boldest move we've made since the National Film Theatre opened 60 years ago.'

Launched in October, the BFI Player is a brandnew video-on-demand platform that promises to provide audiences with the full 'BFI experience' no matter where they live in the UK. 'It's really about reaching nationwide audiences with the things that the BFI already does', explains Humphrey, 'We already have a fantastic cultural programme, but unless you live in London or the South East you struggle sometimes to find it. The BFI Player will allow us to explode that.'

Rather than go head-to-head with the major players in the market, such as LoveFilm and Netflix, the BFI believes that its VOD platform will work alongside them to fill an important gap in the digital landscape. 'We think that the commercial VOD platforms that are out there at the moment do a wonderful job, but we also believe that British, independent, specialized film and non-fiction film are under-represented there. The BFI Player will give

us a route to audiences that tells the whole story of film,' revealed Humphrey.

Channel-surfing

The BFI Player features a mix of free and pay-perview content (roughly a 60:40 split at launch) with the latter titles priced up to £10 depending on the film. Content is currently grouped into six themed 'channels' - Edwardian Britain, Inside Film, Backed by BFI, Cult Cinema, London Film Festival Presents and Gothic: The Dark Heart of Film. All of these are strands that already exist in the physical realm through the

films that the BFI helps fund, its DVD label (Cult Cinema draws exclusively on its Flipside physical media imprint) and seasons of screenings at the Southbank (such as Gothic...).

While this might sound a little limiting in reach, there's already a rich and diverse collection of material on offer, ranging from 28 hours of Mitchell and Kenyon's non-fiction films

The Selfish Giant appeared day-and-date on BFI Player



Edward Humphrey: 'We're not aiming to displace or compete with anyone. Instead we're adding to the overall VOD landscape'

shot between 1900 and 1913 (the first time that the entirety of the collection has ever been made available to the public) to modern

genre classics like Attack the Block and Sightseers. And since launch the platform has also gone day-and-date with two theatrical releases – the BFI's new restoration of the 1924 documentary *The Epic* of Everest and Clio Barnard's acclaimed new British drama The Selfish Giant.

Apart from the lack of surround sound support (thankfully, video is HD where possible, with adaptive streaming) the one obvious disappointment at the moment is the fact that the BFI Player remains resolutely browser-based, with no direct Smart TV apps.

However, Humphrey is quick to play down any suggestions that this is due to the BFI's partnership with Samsung and the recent launch of the limited BFI app on that manufacturer's Smart TV platform. 'As we really needed to open the BFI Player up to as many people as possible, going over the web is the easiest way for us to do that.' Humphrey also revealed that the BFI is currently talking to a variety

> of device manufacturers and TV platforms. Hopefully, we may see some movement in this area when Phase 2 of the BFI Player launches in May 2014.

The addition of digital lockers and digital copies to the BFI Player ecosystem is also being explored. 'UltraViolet is on our horizon, but it wasn't something that we were able to bring into the scope of our first iteration of the service', revealed Humphrev. 'Like with a lot of platform holders and a lot of distributors we're not quite there yet, but absolutely it's on our horizon.'



This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



Now TV hits the high street
Sky's pocket-sized Now TV media streamer can now be picked up from branches of Argos,
Currys PC World and John Lewis across the UK
in a choice of two bundles. £14.99 gets you a Now TV
Box plus a Sky Sports Day Pass providing unlimited access to all six Sky Sports channels for a 24-hour period. Meanwhile, £24.99 will get you a Now TV Box

with a three-month Sky Movies Pass.

Panasonic kills plasma
Just as we were going to press, Panasonic
Japan confirmed that it will cease production of plasma display panels this December in response to 'rapid, drastic changes in the business environment and a declining demand for PDP in the flat

panel display market'. The company will stop business operations at its Amagasaki P3, P4 and P5 factories by the end of March, 2014. Expect more news and reaction in the next issue of *HCC*.

Making movies on demand

Netflix CCO Ted Sarandos has revealed that
the VOD platform is considering entering
movie production following the success it
achieved in episodic TV programming. The company
apparently sees this as one way of circumventing the
traditional pay-TV release windows that currently
prevent films from being made available sooner.

Fourth time lucky?

Oliver Stone has confirmed that he recently finished work on a fourth(!) cut of his 2004 historical epic Alexander for a Blu-ray release next year. As the previous release was subtitled 'The Final Cut', what will this one will be called?

Sky sets more records

UK satcaster Sky has enjoyed yet another record-breaking quarter for its connected TV services. According to its first-quarter results to September 30th, 2013, Sky's On Demand service saw a fourfold increase in weekly usage, with almost 50,000 customers a week dipping in. Meanwhile unique users of Sky Go hit a new high of 3.3million, while Sky Go Extra added 219,000 customers.

Supermarket sweep
Supermarkets are becoming more and more important to DVD and Blu-ray shoppers in the UK, according to the latest research from the British Video Association. 57 per cent of those polled say that they browse for video titles while doing their grocery shopping and a quarter say that DVD/BD selection is a key factor in deciding which grocery store to shop at.

THX sets audio Benchmark
THX has partnered with Benchmark Media
Systems to launch the world's first power
amplifier incorporating THX's patented
low-dissipation analogue amp technology. The
Benchmark two-channel AHB2 is aimed at the
professional recording and broadcasting market
and broke cover at October's 135th AES (Audio
Engineering Society) Convention. The AES has also

awarded THX SVP of Audio R&D Laurie Fincham a Silver Medal for 'significant contributions' to domestic sound reproduction.

Loewe lives
Hoping to quash
rumours of its
impending demise,
German boutique AV brand
Loewe has issued a
statement about its (rather
complex) financial situation.

Suffice to say that the company is currently going through a restructuring process and CEO Matthias Harsch expects to 'announce the joining of an investor at Loewe' in the very near future.

Goodbye Google TV?
Rumours are rife that Google is getting ready to ditch the struggling Google TV brand in order to realign its Smart TV platform more closely with Android.

Amazon's best sellers
To celebrate its 15th birthday, Amazon.
co.uk has revealed its biggest-selling
products since launch. While Harry
Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2 managed to
nab the title of fastest-selling DVD, it was pipped to
the post for overall best-selling DVD by Mamma Mia!.



PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Has Raimi joined Army?

Fede Alvarez, director of this year's Evil Dead remake, has stated on Twitter that Sam Raimi will direct Army of Darkness 2. Cult favourite Bruce Campbell has also confirmed that he's involved in the production.

Better call Bryan..



Breaking Bad creator Vince Gilligan has promised that some of the leads from that show will appear in his upcoming spin-off Better Call Saul. 'Personally, I'd have a hard time resisting putting all these guys in for a cameo or two,' he said of Bryan Cranston and Aaron Paul.

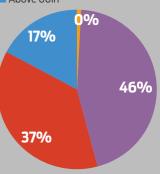
Directing the Doctor

Peter Jackson may still be sitting on the sidelines waiting to see his wish to one day direct an episode of *Doctor Who* come to fruition, but the same can't be said of *Sightseers* director Ben Wheatley. The rising star of British cinema stated that he was 'excited and honoured' to be helming the opening two episodes of the show's next series.

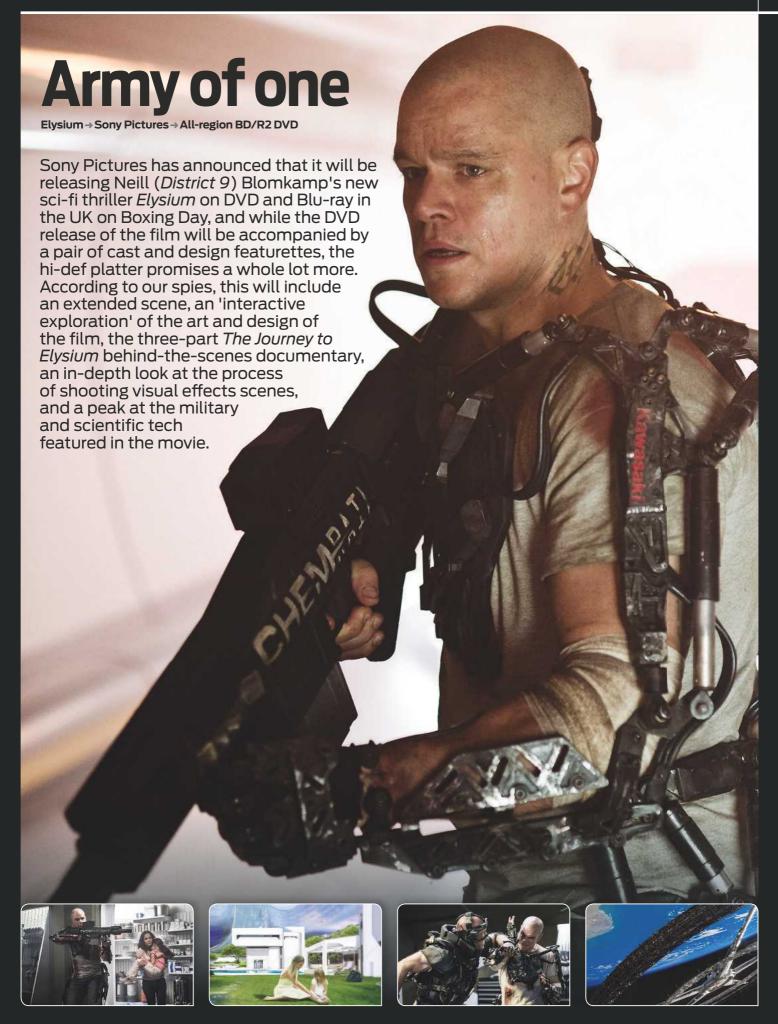
WE ASKED...

What screen size is the largest TV in your home?

- Under 40in
- 40in-50in ■ 50-in-60in
- Above 60in



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featuring





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ig on power and packed with features, Yamaha's top-of-the-line processor/amp duo isn't a system for the faint-hearted. It is, on the other hand, heart-stoppingly brilliant...



WE'VE WAITED A heck of a long time for Yamaha to launch a new home cinema hero to replace the venerable DSP-Z11. But rather than update that integrated design, the brand has opted to birth a pre/power combination as part of its premium Aventage line — and it's a formidable creation.

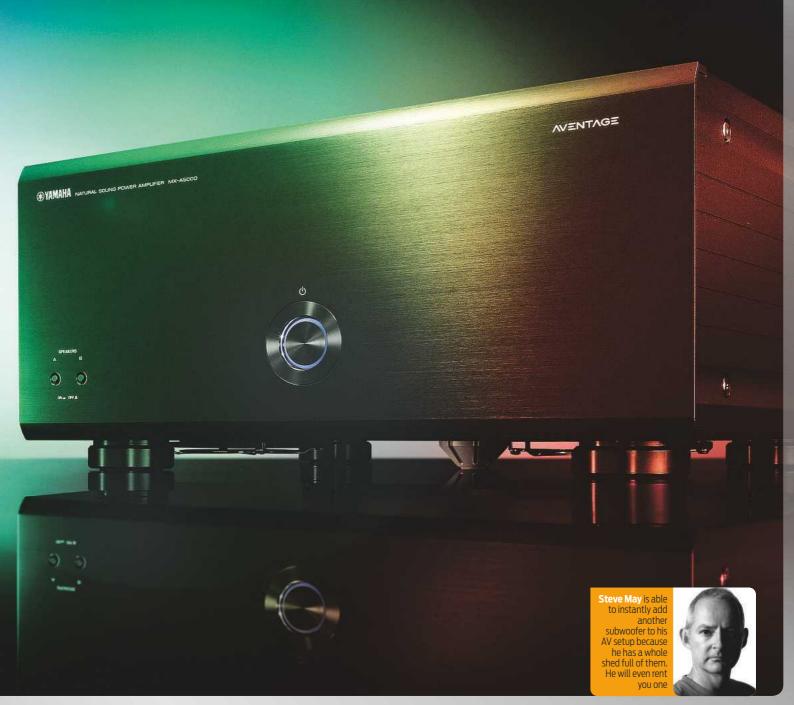
Cosmetically, the duo are spectacular. The CX-A5000, with two-tone cosmetics and a large status window, is a real head-turner, while the power amp's central cyclopean backlit power button is positively iconic. The latter tips the scales at 25.4kg and stands tall at 210mm. Both are available in titanium, black or even gold finishes — the latter a throwback to AV years gone by.

Connectivity is outstanding. Behind the processor's fascia drawbridge you'll find HDMI input and phono AV inputs, plus USB and calibration mic ports. The HDMI, for what it's worth, supports MHL connectivity. This allows users to hookup an Android phone (any of the recent Samsungs or HTCs will do), or an oddball Nokia, to deliver AV up to 7.1 audio and 1080p. Quite why anyone would want to use their mobile as an AV source eludes me, although Yamaha suggests that there are indeed folks prepared to plug their blower into an AV rig to watch content. Nutters.

The back panel is a more daunting mix of skull-pluggery. Seven HDMI inputs, four

component, an Ethernet port, six digital audio inputs (three of which are optical), two 12v triggers (one of which you'll use to tether Pre to Power), remote in/out jacks, an RS232 and a selection of phono AVs make up the mix. Underscoring the lot are balanced XLR outputs for all channels. The muscular, matching MX-A5000 amplifier (11-channel) offers balanced XLR inputs and secondary unbalanced phonos should you want to partner the power amp with an older/different processor. These are sandwiched by two opposing towers of gold-plated speaker connections.

Beneath the lid of the MX-A5000 lurks a huge toroidal transformer and two





high-capacity (27,000uF) block capacitors. Yamaha rates the amp's output at 150W-per-channel into 8ohms, and when powered up it happily sups some 650W off the national grid. There's an eco mode which drops the power consumption by around 20 per cent, but there will be some audio degradation at high volume levels if you opt to do this.

Setup challenges

The CX-A5000 processor is so complex I can only scratch the surface of what it offers in this review. Suffice to say that you can go very deep in terms of calibration and signal management — although it's fair to add that's both a blessing and a curse.

'More processing grunt has been thrown at the YPAO autocalibration system, key to tuning the sound'

Even the initial hookup is unconventional. Rather than proffer specific labelled speakers (left, centre, surround right, etc), the amp offers channel numbers. The argument is that this approach offers superior flexibility during installation.

There may be no THX post-processing here – which from an enthusiast point of view I regard as a significant omission – but there's a big upgrade to the brand's signature Cinema DSP, with two chipsets dedicated to acoustical fine-tuning.

Apparitional speaker imaging has long been a talent of Yamaha, and it's widely touted here. The CX-A5000 will fill in the rears with virtual presence speakers (VPS) if you don't have physical boxes, although frankly if you're going to splurge £5,000 on this kind of kit without a full complement of speakers, you need a virtual head

The CX-A5000 provides full 11.2-channel audio processing – if you have the speakers...

examination. The company confides that people are expanding the front soundstage with presence speakers, rather than the rear – it's not a trend I'm familiar with but then perhaps I'm not on trend. Maybe it's big in Japan?

There are 33 DSP modes in total, which Yamaha insists are (probably) all based on acoustically-measured venues; for copyright and licensing reasons the company doesn't divulge their locations (I have it on good authority that Disco is in fact the Solihull Municipal Sports and Social Club, but keep that to yourself...).

More processing grunt has also been thrown at its auto calibration system, with YPAO promising greater number-crunching refinement. You can opt for a single listening position measurement, or multiple and angled measurements. These prove key to tuning this system.

The unit ships with a standard backlit button-fest with a small LCD display. You can also resort to app control.

Functionality is largely in line with the rest of the Aventage fleet. AirPlay is built-in as standard, but there's no integrated Wi-Fi or Bluetooth support. Instead, the brand offers optional aptX Bluetooth and wireless adaptors. The former works off the rearmounted USB slot and offers a coax output that allows the DAC in the processor to handle the conversion. The set also introduces Spotify Connect, for seamless cloud playback from different devices.

Other niceties include HDMI passthrough. Cutely, when the amp is on standby, you can still switch the input without the amp itself requiring to be turned on. Unsurprisingly, 4K passthrough and upscaling are also provided, although this is only really effective on standard-def content, offering edge and detail enhancement. The video processing has been cooked up in Yamaha labs, rather than being brought in from a third-party supplier.

Streaming support from both USB and NAS reaches up to 192kHz, with FLAC and WAV. But there's no support for DSD or Apple lossless.

Where high-res meets low-res

The processor's UI is the same Yamaha



Taking the top off: Yamaha's CX-A5000

A Shaping up Chassis stiffness is enhanced by the H-shaped frame design, aluminium side panels and fifth foot underneath B Triple-layer
The digital, analogue
video and analogue audio
circuit boards are separated
in a three-deck design for
signal purity

C DAC's it! The Yamaha employs ultra-high performance ESS Technology 192kHz/32bit ES9016 DACs across all channels ADVERTISEMENT 21

Projectors made for movies

JVC's new home cinema projectors deliver best-in-class contrast, state-of-the-art connectivity and third-generation 4K e-Shift technology. You just need to choose which one you want...



JVC'S 2014 LINEUP of D-ILA home cinema projectors has been launched, with advancements made across the range promising to deliver the best bigscreen images around. In fact, the company's new trio sport the highest native and dynamic contrast ranges of the projector industry, achieved via new imaging devices and wire grid polarizers.

The three models are the DLA-X500R, DLA-X700R and DLA-X900R – all 3D-enabled and armed with JVC's bespoke 4K e-Shift3 technology. The latter enables Full HD material to be output at a pixel-packed 3,840 x 2,160 resolution, bringing greater detail, clarity and finesse to your Blu-ray collection. And new to the 2014 models is full input compatibility with native 4K sources via HDMI.

Back in black!

JVC's projectors have long been praised for their astonishing black levels and contrast performance, and the DLA-X500R, DLA-X700R and DLA-X900R continue that trend, with native contrast ratios of 60,000:1, 120,000:1 and 150,000:1 respectively. The secret behind these fantastic figures lies in the premium hardware employed – the new PJs each use three sixth-generation proprietary D-ILA imaging devices, with a pixel gap that's 40 per cent narrower than the previous iteration. Other under-the-hood tweaks include a 10 per cent improvement in light efficiency of the 1,300 Lumens light output, and the user-selectable Intelligent Lens Aperture, which can deliver deeper black levels while maintaining peak whites, and is responsible for dynamic contrast figures of up to 1,500,000:1 for the flagship DLA-X900R.

Despite all this technology on tap, JVC ensures its new models are simple to install and calibrate. A free app provides remote control of the projector from your smartphone, while picture preset modes sit alongside extensive adjustment tools, giving you the ultimate control of how your images look. Both the DLA-X700R and DLA-X900R feature THX and ISF certification, too.

Whether you grab a demo of the reference-level DLA-X900R (which employs hand-selected components), the potent DLA-X700R or the eminently affordable DLA-X500R, one thing remains certain. You will be blown away!

Check out www.jvc.co.uk for more details or e-mail hdworld@jvc.co.uk for a demonstration



front-end we've had for a while, and frankly it doesn't really cut the mustard here. For a box dedicated to high-resolution audio and video, the interface is embarrassingly low-fi, with almost incomprehensible artwork icons. The brand's insistence on a jumble of jumping on points also makes for an unintuitive user experience.

Yamaha's Scene macro presets, which allow various commands to be strung together under a CEC umbrella, can be used to simplify operation if you're prepared to put in the legwork setting them up.

Build quality refinements are many and luxurious. Both components feature Yamaha's favoured ART Wedge (a centred fifth foot) which shortens any potential chassis flex points, thereby reducing unwanted vibration. Not only does the processor employ a symmetrical layout to separate audio and video, even digital and analogue boards are kept apart because they apparently vibrate at different frequencies.

Multi-zone options are solid. The combo can serve four rooms, two with 5.1 audio and 1080p video, and the remainder with stereo. Quite how this is implemented depends on the configuration chosen, but there's some flexibility for pro-installers depending on if they opt to distribute digital or analogue sources. It's perhaps disappointing, though, that there are only two HDMI outputs; given that two are

standard requirements in many theatres (for screen and projector), there's no real option to run HDMI to an additional zone.

Unleashing the magic

The CX-A5000/MX-A5000 is both magnificent and challenging. Depending on content, I found myself forever going back, tweaking and manipulating, not least because the system encourages it. Although the power amp runs to 11 channels, I initially used it in a standard configuration 7.2, although I eventually added a third sub, which naturally complicated the whole process. Subwoofer management includes an adjustable filter roll-off that can be used to shave bass from



Use the Scene mode buttons on the processor's handset to create one-touch system commands

content, typically dialogue, that shouldn't be leaking out of your woofer.

Those with centre channels placed low down can utilise a virtual dialogue lift – personally, I've always located my centre speaker high because I rather like the auditorium vibe that creates. Interestingly, there's also a dialogue level adjustment. While this doesn't boost the entire centre, it can be used to raise the level of dialogue in the mix. While effective, this also acerbates the sometimes acerbic nature of the MX-A5000 power amplifier, so employ with care.

Yamaha's flagship two-piece is frankly powerful enough to bring a small hall to the brink of sonic meltdown, and is ideally used in a dedicated theatre with all the construction finesse which that implies.

Tonally, the system is peanut brittle rather than chocolate Gü. Even after days of Rammstein's Völkerball, it refused to substantially mellow. Unlike some of Yamaha's more mainstream offerings, this pre/power is not a UK-tuned product. Instead it's described as a 'collaboration' between different Yamaha territories and Japan. You would hope it's in good hands, though. Yamaha has reputedly recalled its senior engineers from boardroom duties and given then responsibility for prestige hardware launches like the CX-/MX-A5000.

The good news is that the sheer wealth of calibration on offer ultimately allows the system to be carved into something very special indeed. After some experimentation, I found that to get the best from the YPAO I absolutely had to include angle

Connections

AUSB

The rear-mounted USB is intended to be used with Yamaha's optional YBA11 aptX Bluetooth adaptor

BEthernet

The CX-A5000 is designed for network use, streaming files from a NAS or accessing music services via a wired connection

C Twin HDMI outputs

The two HDMI outs can output the same signal simultaneously. In most home cinemas that will mean one running output to a flatpanel TV, the other to a projector

D Balanced XLRs

For optimal performance and reliability, couple the CX-A5000 processor to the MX-A5000 power amp with rugged pro-style balanced XLR cables

measurements, which seem to make a massive difference to the calibration process. But even after that some manual adjustment was required. In my listening room, with Definitive Technology Reference in-walls, I took the crossover of the centre channel down to 60Hz, the left/rights to 80Hz, and left the four surrounds set Large. After a little more massaging, this 7.3 system really began to gel.

The power and directionality on tap is astonishing. When Katniss Everdeen flees a forest of fireballs in *The Hunger Games*, the resulting destruction is positively holographic. From the ambience of the canopy to splintering trees, the soundstage is immense. Helping defining this are ES9016 SABRE (32) Ultra DACs capable of 128dB dynamic range and infinitesimal 0.0003 per cent total harmonic distortion.

Similarly, looping the opening car race to *The Fast and Furious 6* proves to be the next best thing to a free pass to the Paddock Club on Silverstone race day. The articulation of this system is extraordinary; the sound mix that makes up the roaring car notes reveals itself in tantalising layers. Then the 2 Chainz And Wiz Khalifa theme song kicks in and the grin across my face spreads wider than Dwayne Johnson's biceps.

Of course, there's musicality to the combo too; the system is as sprightly and rhythmic as it is insanely dynamic. But I wouldn't buy it to play music, this is an AV thoroughbred and proud of it. It does what all great home theatre components do: makes you want to watch your favourite movies time and again.

Worth waiting for

®YAMAHA

Yamaha's CX-A5000/MX-A5000 Aventage combo may not be for the faint-hearted, but this long-awaited flagship will fast-track you to the best AV thrill ride in town. In terms of sheer might and depth, no other home theatre product I've used has come close. And I've little doubt that it has the chops to be partnered with some deliciously high-end hardware. Given that, the £2,500-a-piece price tag seems entirely reasonable.

Of course, it's not perfect. The low-res user interface isn't fit for polite company, THX post-processing is noticeable by its absence, file format support could be more comprehensive and, inevitably, it's terrifyingly complex – buyers should perhaps consider it as part of a professional installation.

But all that aside, the sheer rush of running this system at -15dB more than compensates. Yamaha has taken far too long to remind us of just what it's capable of, but this glorious package certainly delivers the message ■

ON THE MENU



→ We found that to truly optimise the performance of the Yamaha combo we needed to take advantage of the manual speaker setup...

SPECIFICATIONS

CX-A5000

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes
THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes. 7.1
MULTIROOM: Yes. Three additional zones
AV INPUTS: 4 x composite; 4 x S-Video; 7 x
digital audio (4 x optical and 3 x coaxial)
HDMI: 8 x inputs; 2 x outputs, vl.4
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 2160p
COMPONENT VIDEO: 4 x inputs; 1 x output

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 192(h) x 448(d)mm WEIGHT: 13.6kg ALSO FEATURING: XLR output; Cinema DSP; Virtual Rear Presence Speakers; dialogue lift; 12 Scene presets; MHL support; HDMI

passthrough; Apple OS and Android control apps; multi-point YPAO RoomEQ; audio file playback via DLNA; high-resolution music enhancer; Ethernet; USB; AirPlay; Spotify Connect; integrated setup web browser; Bluetooth and Wi-Fi via optional dongles

MX-A5000

POWER OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 11 x 150W CONNECTIONS: Balanced XLR inputs for all channels; phono inputs; eleven speaker channel outputs; 12v trigger DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 210(w) x 463.5(d)mm

WEIGHT: 25.4kg
ALSO FEATURING: ART (Anti-Resonance
Technology) wedge; H-frame with doublebottom construction; three-stage Darlington
circuit; Auto-Power standby

HCC Verdict

Yamaha CX-A5000/MX-A5000

→£2,500/£2,500 → www.uk.yamaha.com → Tel: 0844 811 1116

HIGHS: Herculean muscle; dazzling dynamics; deep calibration modes; comprehensive connectivity; outstanding design and build quality

LOWS: Head-scratchingly complex to optimise; no THX post-processing; fuzzy UI; only two HDMI outputs; can sound a touch hard





The only sure-fire way to avoid being disappointed on Christmas morning is to purchase your own presents, so **Team HCC** offers this wishlist of AV accessories and software

Smarten up your lighting.

We've written previously in HCC about Philips' innovative, flexible and admittedly somewhat pricey Hue Wi-Fi app-controlled light bulbs — now the company has added two further products that take the flexibility even further. Where the original Hue bulbs had to screw in directly to a light fitting, the new Bloom is an all-in-one curved lamp that can plug in anywhere — this costs £80, but don't forget you'll need to have the £180 Hue starter pack (which bundles three screwcap bulbs and the necessary Wi-Fi bridge).

Make your Sky+HD box the king of the catwalk

Sky's 2TB HD receiver doesn't have to wear a dress of unassuming black – the satcaster has roped in fashion icons Roland Mouret, Giles Deacon, Sophie Dahl and Kit Neale to create themed designs based around their

favourite types of TV shows. Our particular pick is Mouret's seemingly blood-spattered effort that denotes his passion for gritty crime dramas (top left). And, yes, even the remote control is given a makeover, too. The boxes offer built-in Wi-Fi.

www.sky.com



Make sure you're sitting comfortably

Dedicated seating is the ultimate add-on to any movie room and while you can find bargains on eBay – including authentic cinema seating looking for a new home – buying brand new ensures you won't find any chewing gum stuck to the bottom. Comfy-chair specialist Front Row is one of the most affordable brands around, with its Modular range beginning at £900 for a single recliner. The price includes a five-year warranty, and the chairs can be specced with additional cup-holders, popcorn trays and even tactile transducers should you wish. Building seating rows is aided by various left/right/ double options.

www.frontrow-seating.co.uk

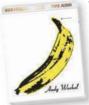


Watch the Dark Knight rise again

Batfans should definitely check out Warner Home Video's recent The Dark Knight Trilogy: Ultimate Collector's Edition Blu-ray boxset, even if they've already grabbed the movies as standalone releases. This new package collects the three Christopher Nolan/Christian Bale flicks (Batman Begins, The Dark Knight and The Dark Knight Rises) and adds oodles of bonus material - including 90 minutes of exclusive new material – plus a letter from Nolan, a 48-page photo book, replicas of the Tumbler, Batpod and Bat, and mini posters of the series villains from print specialist Mondo. All for £55

www.warnerbros.co.uk

Let your ears in on some high-fidelity audio



Your home cinema can also double up as a music mecca, and Universal Music's new High Fidelity Pure Audio

discs deliver a better audio quality than your existing CD and MP3 library. These music-only BD platters arrive with either DTS-HD or Dolby TrueHD stereo mixes (with 5.1 versions offered where available), plus PCM, at resolutions of 96kHz/24-bit and above. The launch titles included The Rolling Stones' Exile on Main Street and Grrr!, The Velvet Underground & Nico and Nirvana's Nevermind — more releases are on the way. Pricing is £17. http://store.universal-music.co.uk

Gorge on TV boxsets

TV titan HBO has a plethora of Blu-ray and DVD boxsets available, giving you an easy way to enjoy high-quality telly marathons without having to faff around with your PVR. BD highlights include the first three seasons of fantasy hit *Game of* Thrones, available separately for £50 each; Boardwalk Empire: The Complete First, Second and Third Seasons boxset (£75); and the Steven Spielberg-produced WW2 series Band of Brothers and The Pacific (£50 each). On DVD, meanwhile, The Sopranos: The Complete DVD Collection gathers all 86 episodes of New Jersey mob shenanigans across 28 discs (£70), and The Wire: The Complete Series 1-5 DVD boxset provides more epic crime thrills. www.hbouk.com

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Remote controlled vis your iOS device, this model supercar sells for £100 and features working headlamps, brakelights and indicators, moveable gull doors and a collision sensor. Oh, and you can stream music from iTunes to its in-built speaker as you thrash it around your cinema room. Cool. www.sciencemuseumshop.co.uk

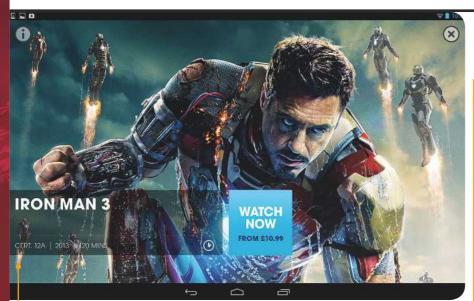
Proporta cases



Using a smartphone or tablet as your system controller? Then you might

want to protect it against being knocked off the sofa arm in the dark. Proporta offers dedicated cases for Apple, Samsung, Sony, Google, Blackberry and Kindle tablets – including natty designs from the likes of Ted Baker – and most come with a lifetime warranty. Pricing ranges from £10-£80. www.proporta.co.uk

26 XMAS GIFTS



Enjoy movies hassle-free

Video-on-demand services are legion these days, but Tesco's Blinkbox reckons it can steal a march on both Netflix and LoveFilm by offering movie and TV series downloads on the same date as the release of the physical disc, claiming ten times more content than either platform. It's a subscription-free service, with titles simply

available to rent or buy. Pricing for an HD download of Fast & Furious 6, for example, is £4.49 for the former and £13.99 for the latter. Usually you setup an account online, but if family members are stumped when it comes to your stocking filler, they can nip into a Tesco store and pick up a Blinkbox Gift Card, available in £5, £10 and £20 flavours. www.blinkbox.com

Blinkbox gives you instant access to the latest action blockbusters

Update your Samsung TV

With TV technology advancing at a terrifying speed, the idea that the TV you buy today could be updated to deliver the features of tomorrow is enormously appealing. Cue Samsung's Evolution Kits – boxes of electronics that attach to compatible Samsung TVs (currently 2012's ES7000 and ES8000 series) and replace those TVs' original chipsets, essentially turning old tellies into new ones for £250.

The glossy finish matches the rear of your TV, but once installed, does stick out a bit beyond the original TV depth. Fitting isn't easy, either – the connection feels soft and imprecise, and getting the Evolution Kit to slot firmly into place is fiddly.

It is worth the hassle, though. For starters the entire interface is upgraded, swapping 2012's Smart TV menus for the much superior multi-hub approach of this year's models. You also get all Samsung's new content options, including the main UK catchup TV services and the Recommendations system. Samsung also ships a 2013 touchpad handset with the Evolution Kit for full interface compatibility, and menu browsing is quickened since the Evolution Kit introduces Quad Core processors, which also works to improve image processing.

Buyers won't get absolutely every feature of this year's F7000/F8000 models. Cinema Black isn't offered, since Samsung's 2012 TVs don't support the necessary dimming controls. Nor will upgraded TVs mirror your smart device like 2013 models can.

Overall though, the amount of extra features and quality the Evolution Kit brings to your old TV is remarkable, making the £250 price look like peanuts.

www.samsung.co.uk





Speaker wiring is the last thing some people think about when fitting a system, but if yours is getting tatty, doesn't terminate the way you want it to or you just fancy stepping up a level, then The Chord Company's new Sarsen range promises a bit of audiophile panache without an eye-watering price tag. Available for £8-per-metre, and made in the UK, it measures a discreet 4mm in diameter and uses multi-stranded oxygen-free copper conductors. Termination options are 4mm banana plugs, BFA connectors, spade connectors and, of course, bare wire – and custom configurations are also available to order.

As for your subwoofer, AudioQuest has unleashed a six-strong lineup of cables all named after dogs (woofers... geddit?) that promises to 'add serious bite to any home entertainment system's bark'. Prices here range from a sensible £29 for the 2m Black Lab cable

with long-grain copper connectors, to a fabulously decadent £9,049 for a 20m version of the flagship Wild Dog, which uses 100 per cent solidsilver conductors and can be finished with an XLR plug. www.chord.co.uk www.audioquest.com



Give your iPad its own place to stay

Apple's iPad has been embraced by the world of home automation as an alternative to a dedicated touchscreen controller, and Imagine Audio's iStone range embraces the innovative tablet even further by offering a sleek-looking and solidly built wall-mount. As the name suggests, these mounts are constructed not from plastic but from a precision-machined stone/acrylic composite – giving them a neat marble-effect finish and feel. iPad Minis and iPad 4s are catered for, and charging is provided courtesy of integrated Cat5-USB adaptors. Pricing starts at around £375. And, yes, your iPad can be detached whenever you need it.

www.istoneproducts.com



Plug your music in...

JBL's SoundFly BT is a Bluetooth speaker with a twist, as it plugs directly into a socket, with no run of cable. While this makes installation somewhat inflexible – you're limited to where your power points are, basically – it does mean you can slot it into any room fairly unobtrusively, aided by its curved, smallscale design. Setup is simply a matter of pairing the SoundFly BT with your Bluetooth device – a free app provides volume adjustments. While sound quality is naturally limited by the speaker's small dimensions (amplification is rated at 20W), it's fine for uncritical listening, and the portability is a boon. http://uk.jbl.com

...or take it with you

It may seem that there are more wireless audio speakers around than humans able to listen to them, but Samsung's diminutive £250 DA-F61 stands out from the crowd by virtue of its NFC integration (as well as aptX Bluetooth) and compatibility with (some of) the brand's tellies via Soundshare, meaning you can keep track of what you're watching in another room. It's neatly designed, too, with round edges, pop-out volume knob and built-in stand, and the chargeable Lithium-ion battery lasts for around 12 hours. And it sounds good, with a decent low-end punch alongside clear higher frequencies.

www.samsung.co.uk

Boost your bass



It's a sad truth, but the average living room isn't suited to sub-bass. Room modes can create havoc

with low frequencies, creating a response that is often far from smooth. The DSPeaker Anti-Mode 8033 is a neat little gadget that works to overcome these issues, and the performance benefits it can provide are well worth the £230 asking price. Place it between your receiver's LFE output and your sub's line-level input, calibrate the listening area with the supplied mic, and the 8033 analyses the response and applies correction. A bypass switch lets you flick between tamed and untamed performance, enabling you to easily hear the benefits.

www.lsound.eu



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True Blood: Drinks & Bites



Whether you're hosting a movie night in your cinema or simply want a tasty snack for yourself,

you won't go wrong with the 45 recipes for fiendishly good fingerfood and cocktails found in this TV tie-in cookbook. www.chroniclebooks.com

Great Showdowns: The Return



Artist Scott C. is back with a second volume of his incredibly funny and curiously

good-natured recreations of famous movie showdowns. www.titanbooks.com

Put home cinema in every room

HD Anywhere's 4x4 Multiroom+ is a superb solution to the problem of having lots of lovely source kit in one room but TVs throughout the house. Using the versatile HDBaseT standard, it allows a single Ethernet cable (Cat5e upwards) to carry lossless HD video and audio, plus internet data and system control, over 100m without any signal problems. This £1.500 bundle comprises everything you need - a main unit with four HDMI inputs and four Ethernet outs, four small HDMI receivers to connect to your displays, a full complement of cables and IR repeaters.

www.hdanywhere.co.uk

Back up your media – in style

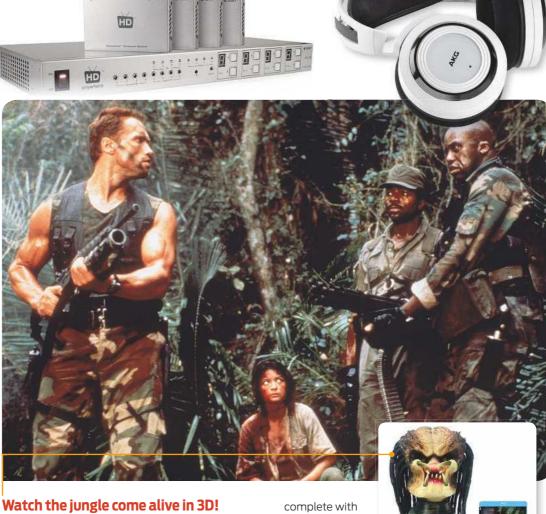


spilt cup of coffee away from total destruction (and research suggests it probably is), you could do worse than back it up on a dedicated HDD. Toshiba's new STOR.E Slim portable hard drive can be bought in either 500GB or 1TB iterations - for £70 and £100 respectively - and offers USB 3.0 (and backwards compatibility with USB 2.0) for fast data transfer. The brushed metal finish and svelte design ensure it will look good wherever you plonk it.

www.toshiba.co.uk

Don't wake the household

Headphones are a must-have if you want to watch movies (or listen to music) late at night without disturbing other household members, and AKG's wireless K935s mean you don't have to put up with a cable from your sofa to your amp. The charger/transmitter unit offers both 3.5mm and stereo phono inputs, and it automatically connects, via 2.4GHz transmission, to the over-the-ear cans. These are comfy, relatively lightweight and feature built-in volume control. Sound performance is detailed and not overshadowed by unruly bass. http://uk.akg.com



The 1987 Arnold Schwarzenegger sci-fi classic Predator is getting a stereoscopic Blu-ray release on December 16 – but why bother with the regular iteration when you could opt for this funky Amazon-exclusive limited edition that sees the 3D platter accompanied by a replica of the titular big-game hunting beasty's head -

removable helmet! This is surely the ultimate trophy for any cinema room...■

www.amazon.co.uk

THE BIG SCREEN 3D EXPERIENCE



FREE 3D BLU-RAY PLAYER PLUS 3D BLU-RAY DISC WITH SELECTED HOME CINEMA PROJECTORS

In celebration of the release of The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug, purchase an Epson EH-TW6100W or EH-TW6100 projector between 01/11/2013 and 31/12/2013 and claim a **FREE** 3D Blu-ray player* plus 3D Blu-ray disc of The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey.

These projectors are ideal for film enthusiasts, gamers and sports fans. Boasting features usually reserved for top-of-the-range models, these products offer high definition 2D and 3D viewing which is easy to set up and use.

For further product information, or to claim, visit www.epson.co.uk/thehobbit

Terms and conditions apply, visit www.epson.co.uk/thehobbit for more details.

* Subject to availability



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HE DOES THE MASH

Hal Hickel, animation supervisor at Industrial Light & Magic, chats to Anton van Beek about creating the blockbustin' battle sequences in Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim*

What does the job of animation supervisor on a movie like *Pacific Rim* entail?

'Every visual effects project that Industrial Light & Magic works on has a visual effects supervisor who's sort of our overall creative lead. But any project that we work on that has any kind of character animation, be it giant robots or Yoda, will have an animation supervisor like myself who oversees the character animation, and works with the director creating the characters and so forth.'

Guillermo Del Toro comes across as a very collaborative person to work with. Was that the case on this movie?

'Generally you get two types of directors. There are those that have a very clear vision of where they're going, and in some cases that may make them a little less collaborative, as they're more looking for you to just execute their vision. At the other end of the scale you may have a director who is not so visual and doesn't have a clear vision of where they're headed, but who brings other things to the table and is really collaborative — which is fun.

'Guillermo is the sweet spot in between. He's got a very clear vision, he draws well and he can explain the image that he's looking for or the moment, the feeling. But at the same time he's highly collaborative. He expected us to contribute ideas and test things out that weren't in the plan to begin with.'

That must be a great experience compared to creating exactly what has been storyboarded...

'Absolutely. Frequently in visual effects, we'll work with the director ahead of shooting, and be on set during the shooting of the footage that we're going to be putting our creatures into. But at the end of the day they'll give us a cut scene, which is a pretty tight framework for where your creature goes. And they'll say: "Okay, there are the extras running way from your creature, so it has to go here and get from A to B in so many frames." Whereas, on this film, because the action is taking place on such a vast stage, it really didn't make sense to shoot footage to put the Jaegers and the Kaiju into. Even in the case of the Hong Kong

fight, there really weren't any streets wide enough to stage that action, so that all had to be synthetic.

'What that meant is that the workflow became more like an animated feature. Rather than being given footage into which we'd put our creatures, we were just given storyboards and animatics and then would make a crude run-through in CG to figure out all of the staging, and then hand that off to the animators. This meant we had a lot more freedom to design shots and to figure out how to shoot things. So when we got to the performances of the creatures in the shots we had a lot more freedom.'

Were you already a fan of the Japanese Kaiju genre that *Pacific Rim* draws upon?

'I was a huge fan as a kid. I think the first film to really make an impact on me, in terms of what I ended up doing later, was the original King Kong. I saw that on TV and quickly after that, on any Sunday in the '70s, you would find me watching Godzilla, Gamera, Rodan or any of the big Japanese monster movies.'

When dealing with these kind of creatures you're working on an incredibly large scale. Does that pose any problems?

'One of the challenges is that immediately when we get a project we start looking around for references that will put us in mind of what we're doing. So, for a dinosaur picture you go to the zoo and look at giraffes, rhinos and ostriches for movement references. But for things that are 250ft tall there's nothing out there. Okay, there's a giant earth-moving machine in Germany that's on that scale, but it doesn't walk!

'We already know some of the rules for how to make big things move, such as slowing them down – but the difficulty there is that almost all of our scenes with the Jaegers and the Kaiju were action scenes. They're fighting >



scenes, so you couldn't have that transpiring in what appears to be slow-motion. You would have to find ways to keep the scale correct, but still have it be exciting — figuring out how fast we could move them and still have it be real. We also had to be mindful that surrounding them at all times there was going to be realistic fluid simulations when they're in the ocean, or destruction simulation of them knocking down buildings...'

Exactly! You're surrounding them with incredibly complex environmental and particle effects as well...

'Yeah, one of the largest challenges on this movie was the destruction and water simulation. That stuff evolves every year and gets better, but it's still some of the hardest and most challenging work there is. If we move the characters too fast it'll make the water and destruction simulations blow up, look crazy, and there's a visual mismatch between the two. So when animating the characters we had to be mindful of what was going to follow on after in the animation.

'Once we'd reached the point where it was about as fast as we could go but still looking good, it became a job of discovering how to shoot the action to keep it feeling exciting. Where to cut from one shot to another, inventing shots. As I said, a lot of that is down to Guillermo. He had a very strong vision for the film and worked closely with his editors, but he did invite us to contribute.

'For instance, in one of the first fights between Gipsy Danger and Knifehead, there's a moment where Gipsy throws this big punch. Now, rather than play that wide as just a big sweeping roundhouse, which would look quite slow, we came up with a shot where the camera is actually mounted on Gipsy's fist. So you're hurtling through air towards the Kaiju's face. That's an example of the way that we can inject some excitement into what otherwise might be the slow process of getting that fist over to the Kaiju.'

'The biggest challenge was that the decision to make *Pacific Rim* 3D was made kind of late in the process'

The Kaiju have to be given a sense of intelligence purely through the animation. How difficult was that to pull off?

'Well, monsters are Guillermo's favourite thing. He loves designing giant robots, but at the end of the day he really loves his monsters.

'One of the things he was adamant about from day one was that he never wanted them just standing there looking, well, monstery. It always had to look like they were thinking, planning their next move or recovering from a punch or something. We could never just have them waiting for the next punch to land, as you might find with a stunt person. He was always saying, "Yeah, it looks cool, but what is he thinking, why is he doing that?" That was great, making sure that there was always motivation in what they were doing.

'It was also very important to him that all of the Jaegers had their own personalities and all of the Kaijus had their own personalities. So Knifehead is very different from Otachi who is very different from Scunner. They all had their own capabilities and wildly different designs and personalities.'

Del Toro has a fondness for asymmetrical creatures. That's evident here in the three-armed Crimson Typhoon Jaeger. Was that tricky to design?

'I'm just glad he didn't make any three-legged Jaegers! It's really hard to animate a walk with three legs and there's a good reason why there aren't any animals on our planet that have three legs. But, yeah, he does like that – asymmetry in general just gives extra visual

interest. In the case of Crimson Typhoon it wasn't a huge challenge because the arm was just a great opportunity to do something different. I think the biggest challenge with Crimson were actually the buzz-saw hands, because that wasn't built into the design right from day one, it was added a little later by Guillermo during the storyboarding process. Then it fell to us to take a look at the hands and figure out how they could plausibly split apart and turn into these spinning saws.'

How many VFX shots did your team complete for the film?

'Around 1,600. I don't have the exact number in front of me, but I know it's around there. And that was about 18 months work. Some of us were on the project for almost exactly two years, if you go back to the test sequence we did of about five shots, which was before we'd actually been awarded the work.'

The live-action material was converted to 3D in post, but the VFX was completed in native stereo. Did that affect how you worked?

'We did our all-CG sequences natively, although there were also some visual effects sequences that were largely plate-based that were converted. I would say that the biggest challenge, frankly, was that decision to go 3D was made kind of late in the process. If it had been made earlier, it would have been easier.

'One of the big concerns we had going into the 3D is that when it's not done right 3D can often miniaturise large scenes. Say you go outside and shoot a cityscape of skyscrapers in 3D – it's not going to have a lot of depth unless a seagull flies by close to camera, because all of that stuff is in the background and distant from the camera. For that reason we were concerned that there might be an effort during the 3D process to force the sense of depth, and that could miniaturise the action. But Guillermo had a really good eye for it, embraced it, got excited about it, and the results were good. I think they really look beautiful and it didn't harm the action.'

Another hot topic linked to 3D is 48fps HFR filmmaking, as seen on *The Hobbit...*

'I think it's interesting. It solves a lot of visual artefacts to do with strobing and so forth. I think the difficulty is that many of those visual artefacts are things that people have just grown up with and that they view as being integral to the film experience. So when you smooth them out they feel like they're watching something else.

'It's like digital projection. When that came out you used to hear a lot of people, film buffs, saying that it was too smooth, it didn't feel like film, that there was no gate weave or scratches or anything that makes it feel like they were watching it on celluloid. And that





sort of went away. Not too many people any more are bothered by seeing a film projected digitally. In fact, these days when I see a movie projected on film, it's glaring to me when I see a hair or a spot of dirt.

'So I wonder if, over time, people will just get used to seeing a smoother, less stroboscopic image. And in a while kids will grow up on movies like that and think that's how movies should look. But I don't really have an opinion either way. It does look a bit weird to me, but I understand why it looks weird and that my eyes aren't used to it.'

Finally, what kind of movies do you like to relax with at home?

'There's a handful of movies that are always at the top of my list. One of them is *Chinatown*; I dearly love that film and have watched it over and over. And then there are movies you'd sort of expect: *Blade Runner*, *Metropolis*, *King Kong*, anything by Ray Harryhausen.

'Lawrence of Arabia is another favourite. My son is 12 now so I'm starting to get him in front of movies, and he's been great about it. It can be tough sometimes with kids and older films that aren't paced as quickly as modern ones, but he's really receptive so it's a lot of fun.'

Pacific Rim is available on Blu-ray $3D^{TM}$, Blu-ray TM and DVD from 11th November

The Jaegers were meticulously designed by Hickel's team at -

THIS IS ALL ABOUT THE SOUND!



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Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

Selecting and installing home cinema on a DIY basis may leave the system performing at way below its optimum level.

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

So good you'll believe you're there!

75

Confused?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of longestablished specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top 20 AV shops in the country

SOUTH

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245 www.rayleighhifi.com

Kingston-upon-Thames

INFIDELITY

9 High Street, Hampton Wick. 020 8943 3530 www.infidelity.co.uk

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street. 01628 633995 www.audiovenue.com

Norwich

MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street. 01603 627134 www.martinshifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street. 01268 779762

CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932 www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road. 01702 435255 www.rayleighhifi.com

Tunbridge Wells

KENT HOME CINEMA

69 London Road, Southborough. 01892 535007 www.kenthomecinema.co.uk

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street. 020 8567 8703 www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500 www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea. 020 7924 2040 www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street. 024 7652 5200 www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottinghan

CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way. 0115 9584404 www.castlesoundvision.com

Solihull

MUSIC MATTERS

93-95 Hobs Moat Road. 0121 742 0254 www.musicmatters.co.uk

NORTH

York

SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate. 01904 627108 www.soundorg.co.uk





The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, RADA or CEDIA

www.top20uk.info



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SERVICE	*	\star	\star	\star	*
FACILITIES	*	\star	\star	\star	*
VERDICT			3		

..Talk to the experts



ESSEX-BASED INSTALLER CINEMA

Rooms is responsible for this tidy-looking movie den that was formerly a kids' playroom. And the finished result probably justifies having to find somewhere else to put all the Lego.

The brief from the owners was typical. They wanted a dedicated cinema room with a discreet speaker install – no looming floorstanders, please – yet without compromising on sound quality. They already had a number of sources, including a Sonos setup, Apple TV, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Sky+HD receiver and even a Darbee video processor. The installers' job was to marry

these to a reference-grade projector and speaker setup.

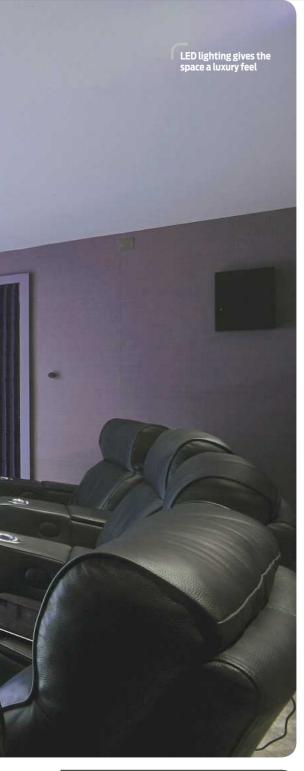
The art of noise

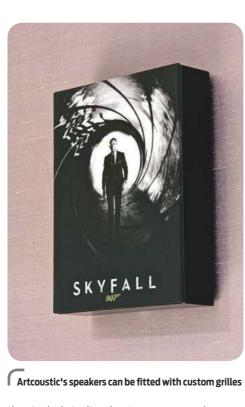
An Oppo BDP-105EU Blu-ray player, Onkyo TX-NR818 AV receiver and JVC DLA-X55 projector met those requirements, working in partnership with speakers from high-end on-wall/in-wall specialist Artcoustic. Cinema Rooms' Simon Gregory explains that his outfit regularly specifies Artcoustic's enclosures. '[It is] our primary loudspeaker brand as the range ticks all the boxes for us. It really performs, which is vital from a confidence and credibility point of view.'

The array specified uses three Artcoustic Spitfire SL8-4s for the front soundstage, which each carry 12 drivers housed in a relatively svelte 67mm-deep cabinet. These sit behind the 2.5m-wide acoustically-transparent Screen Excellence screen, and their slim-line nature means installation only required the screen to be mounted upon wooden battens — no chasing in was required.

Diablo SLs are used for the surround channels, while bass is provided by a pair of Spitfire SL subwoofers, which plumb the depths down to 20Hz.

The curved array of cinema seats came from online entertainment retailer Drinkstuff;





they include incline, heat, massage and storage functions.

The main challenge of the makeover was transforming the room's aesthetics. 'The previous owners had converted their double garage into a kids' playroom/storage room with quite a nice cloakroom,' explains Gregory. 'Upon moving in, we found the room was quite cold/harsh – porcelain white tiles, hard gloss white cupboards. Being a tiled white room it was not really suited to cinema use.'

The solution was to implement a full overhaul – with the owners' approval, of course. The existing cabinetry was removed and the screen was fitted to the wall. Following that, it was a case of carpeting the floor, strengthening the front wall to hold the L/C/R speakers and subwoofer, feltwrapping the doors, applying silk wallpaper and refitting the lighting with the help of LEDs and Rako. Control is achieved via an RTI system. The room, says Gregory, became unrecognisable to how it first looked.

Optimum quality

The install took a little over a month to complete, from first renovations to calibration. The latter included ISF tweaking of the JVC light-cannon to ensure optimum quality from the variety of sources on offer.

The cinema is now getting regular use. We're told the owners are in there a minimum of two-to-three times a week, mixing up movie nights with bigscreen football. And they're also making more use of it than they first imagined for listening to tunes. 'Music was to be secondary but has actually worked out quite well – streaming Spotify via the Artcoustic array is fantastic...'



The Diablo SLs feature three woofers and a tweeter

The cinema uses a ceiling-mounted JVC DLA-X55

KIT CHECKLIST

SCREEN EXCELLENCE: 2.5m acoustically-transparent thin-frame projector screen OPPO: BDP-105EU Blu-ray player JVC: DLA-X55 Full HD projector ONKYO: TX-NR818 AV receiver SKY: Sky+HD PVR SONY: PlayStation 3 MICROSOFT: Xbox 360 SONOS: Music streaming system DARBEE: Video processor ARTCOUSTIC: 3 x SL8-4 speakers (L/C/R); 2 x Diablo SLs (surrounds); 2 x Spitfire SL subwoofers APPLE: Apple TV RAKO: Custom lighting RTI: System control

Serious Home Cinema



demands some Serious AV Separates



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION

RX-V675 - June 2013



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REVIEWS

→ HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS SONY 4K home cinema PJ and soundbar/sub combi PANASONIC 65in 4K LED flatscreen OPPO Blu-ray player with Darbee processing EPSON Affordable gaming projector MONITOR AUDIO High-end soundbar/streamer SAMSUNG Entry-level 51in plasma ARCAM Outboard DAC ROUNDUP Four all-in-one systems go head-to-head AND MORE!



Sony strides ahead of the pack

This 'entry-level' 4K projector is nothing short of a home cinema revolution, reckons a lovestruck **John Archer**

AV Info

PRODUCT:

The first 4K projector to break the £10,000 price barrier

POSITION:

Sony's new entry-level 4K PJ, below the in-bound VPL-VW1100ES

PEERS: JVC DLA-X75; JVC DLA-X95

Sony doesn't offer app control – so don't lose this handset



WITH RIVAL PROJECTION technologies struggling to get their 4K acts together, Sony has been quick to seize the next-gen initiative with its SXRD system, and having launched the stellar 4K-resolution VPL-VW1000ES around 18 months ago, it's now out to blow your minds with the VPL-VW500ES.

The 'killer app' of this new PJ is that it gives you genuine 4K pictures for £8,800 – a price which pitches it into the same price category occupied by good-quality HD projectors like JVC's DLA-X75 and DLA-X95. And making its price even more astonishing is the VPL-VW500ES's specification. Far from being some painfully stripped-down version of the VPL-VW1000ES, in some ways its spec exceeds that of its pricier predecessor.

Particularly eye-catching is its use of Triluminos quantum dot colour technology, designed to produce a more expansive colour range than a normal projection colour system. The VPL-VW500ES's SXRD chips seem startlingly uncompromised, too, with a claimed response time of 2.5 milliseconds – a figure that leaves rival LCD projectors for dead and should help 4K's gorgeous clarity remain intact even when there's motion in the picture.

Similar benefits should arise from Sony's Motionflow engine, which includes a new Combination mode that mixes Sony's previous Film Projection and Motion Enhancer features to, allegedly, deliver 'ultra-smooth, dot-free pictures with natural, fluid movement'. Though to be honest, I still remain inherently sceptical regarding motion processing systems.

Upscaling of non-4K content, meanwhile, comes courtesy of Sony's Reality Creation suite, which worked a treat on the VPL-VW1000ES and Sony's first 4K TVs.

Let someone else do the work...

Another eye-catching feature of the VPL-VW500ES is an Auto Calibration engine where the projector can periodically recalibrate itself to its original factory conditions, using a built-in colour sensor, to compensate for changes to its picture's characteristics that can occur over time. There's also a picture position memory function, so those with 2.35:1 screens can establish lens settings for different aspect ratios, removing the need for an external anamorphic lens attachment.

Setting the Sony up uncovers an excellent 2.06x level of optical zoom and loads of vertical and horizontal image shift. The shift, focus and zoom features can all be adjusted by buttons on the backlit remote control, and you can also integrate the projector into a wider home control/automation system via RS232, RJ45 and IR terminals.

Talking of connections, the VPL-VW500ES carries two HDMIs built to the latest 4K HDMI standard, though it must be stressed that not all HDMI 2.0 connections are equal. Unlike the port on Panasonic's L65WT600 TV, which can handle 60fps 8bit 4K/UHD with 4:4:4 colour sampling, the HDMIs on the VPL-VW500ES can, I'm told, only deliver 4:2:0 sampling at 60fps, so that images lose a little colour precision. Triluminos technology, though, may be able to compensate for this.

Compact cinema

The VPL-VW500ES is a surprisingly compact unit considering what's going on inside, and it looks pretty too with its arced top, large central lens, and sparkly, textured finish.

Naturally I kicked off the testing phase with native 4K material (predominantly fed from a Sony 4K server). And for the most part the results looked every bit as amazing as I'd hoped they would. Detail levels are incredible. All the classic detail indicators like the weaves in clothes, individual blades of grass, facial pores, leaves on trees and so on are present and correct, rendered precisely and densely. And the fast response of Sony's SXRD chipsets means that even 4K footie footage from the 2012 World Cup appears without blurring or judder to spoil the show, while the unit's imaging system makes it virtually impossible to pick out visible pixel structure in the image







The Sony's HDMIs meet the 2.0 spec, but 60Hz 4K content is carried with 4.2.0 colour sampling

– even when I stuck my face right up to my
90in test screen.

4K isn't just about more detail, of course. Native 3,860 x 2,160 images enjoy a much greater depth of field, with the myriad pixels enabling the image to resolve detail much further into the distance. Also, having four times as many pixels means colours can be rendered with what feels like infinite subtlety. Blends and tonal shifts are exquisite. Sony's Triluminos system enhances this sense of colour resolution even further, leaving richlyhued material looking so good it's been known to make grown cinephiles cry. Probably.

The only thing about the 4K native pictures that's anything less than dazzling is the contrast on show during dark sequences.

I'll return to this in more detail later.

As for the VPL-VW500ES's handling of HD, its upscaling talents prove so good I wouldn't have believed it if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes. Essentially, the projector adds high levels of detail and resolution to Blu-ray sources without either exaggerating source noise or leaving movies looking excessively gritty. The final *Harry Potter...* Blu-ray is a particularly tough test for any upscaling engine thanks to its tricky, dark colour palette and grainy finish, yet the Sony handles it brilliantly, adding loads of pixel density and detail without being overbearing.

Upscaled colours impress too, delivering fine blends and natural tones that look only marginally less precise than those obtained from native 4K images.

A step too far

The VPL-VW500ES has just one flaw. When watching dark scenes, like the night battles in *Glory* (one of Sony's Mastered in 4K BD releases) it can't reproduce black levels as deep, rich, stable and convincing as JVC's D-ILA projectors, which are its only real rivals at this price point. If you try to boost black levels by using the projector's dynamic

iris you're regularly distracted by quite strong jumps in the image's overall brightness level. Yet, without the dynamic iris, there's a discernible greyness to parts of the picture that should look black, and this can only be completely combatted by removing more brightness from the picture than I felt comfortable with. It's by no means a bad black level performance, just not best-in-class.

The last part of the VPL-VW500ES's performance to test is its 3D handling, and here again it delivers the goods. Since it uses active 3D technology the projector upscales 3D Blu-rays to 4K – and it does it so well that it's again clear that the unit's upscaling engine outperforms the projector's price point by a huge margin. Stereoscopic sources are taken to above-HD levels of detail and given a gorgeous sense of extra density perfectly suited to the effect.

Fast-moving 3D material is displayed surprisingly credibly considering the level of processing going on, and the projector keeps a tight rein on crosstalk noise. You can still see double imaging over distant picture areas, but it's always subtle, and seldom draws your attention from the main action.

A projector like no other

The VPL-VW500ES is a brilliant proposition. There may be other projectors in its class that offer richer contrast performances, but there's no other projector at anything like its price point that offers the many, varied and stunning advantages associated with genuine 4K imaging. And there's no overstating the importance of its upscaling skills either. While you wait for native 4K content to make itself available, Sony's next-generation PJ will provide a superb makeover for all your HD sources. Grab a demo now

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active
ULTRA HD: Yes. 4,096 x 2,160
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI (v2.0); Ethernet
service port; RS232; IR input; 2 x 12V triggers;
USB port
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,700 ANSI Lumens
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 200,000:1 (dynamic)

DIMENSIONS: 496(w) x 195(h) x 467(d)mm

FEATURES: SXRD projector; DCI resolution; optional wireless HD unit available; colour management; Triluminos colour system; Motionflow video processing; picture position memory; auto calibration system; 4K Reality Creation; 2.06x motorized zoom; horizontal/vertical lens shift; UHP 265W lamp; 5,000-hour lamp life, nine picture presets; 26dB running noise

HCC Verdict



Sony VPL-VW500ES

→£8,800 Approx → www.sony.co.uk → Tel: 0844 8466 555 HIGHS: Native 4K looks incredible; upscaled HD looks nearly as good; remarkably affordable for a 4K projector; excellent colour reproduction LOWS: Contrast is bettered by JVC's D-ILA projectors; slight crosstalk with 3D; 3D spex are optional





The Heart and Soul of Home Cinema

Precision; a new luxury loudspeaker range from Tannoy, engineered to deliver movies precisely as the director intended. High power double-magnet drivers, mass-load cabinets and extremely low-loss crossovers effortlessly deliver breath-taking detail and explosive movie dynamics. Built around a brand new 6 inch (150 mm) version of Tannoy's world renowned Dual Concentric™ driver, two stunning floorstanding models, a compact stand-mount and matching centre channel speaker ensure there is a Precision multichannel system for every size room. Powerful, passionate and incredibly precise, Precision gets to the heart and soul of home cinema like no other speaker in its class.



Future 4K revealed

With the launch of its first Ultra HD TV, Panasonic has thrown open the doors to a high frame-rate future, says **Steve May**

THE ONLY THING certain about the next evolution in broadcast technology is its uncertainty. 4K/Ultra HD may be widely accepted as the next step from 1080p Full HD, but even broadcasters have yet to agree a specification. While BSkyB looks certain to go with 2160p at 50/60Hz for its sports coverage, the BBC is rumoured to want native frame rates to top 100Hz. For brands eager to punt 4K screens this is all rather inconvenient, not least because TVs prior to this Panasonic model are tethered to 4K at 30Hz, thanks to the limitations of current HDMI chippery.

Contrary to popular belief, the future of TV isn't just about spatial resolution, it's about temporal resolution as well. While there's no doubt that an image four times as detailed as Full HD is impressive, broadcasters seem convinced that most consumers will struggle to appreciate the benefit unless they buy a really big screen. However, research indicates that we all immediately appreciate high frame

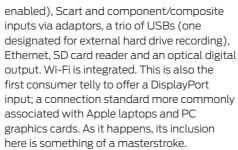
rates: sixty 8m-pixel frames a second, which is supported by HDMI 2.0, equates to a massive 480 megapixels a second of visual information. 30 frames a second taps out at 240mp, which is a lot less detail. Small wonder then that the arrival of the world's first HDMI 2.0 compliant screen, complete with full 18Gbps bandwidth, is potentially a game-changer.

Designer UHD

The TX-L65WT600 reflects
Panasonic's 2013 design ethos, with
a slim chrome bezel and distinctive
illuminated plastic trim across the
bottom edge of the screen. Its slick
appearance is only broken by the
HD cam positioned on top. A cable
tidy umbilical tube is supplied.

Connectivity includes four HDMIs (only one of which is HDMI 2.0-

A touchpad remote is also provided



Naturally the WT600 features Panasonic's internet-connected feature roster, fronted by the customisable My Home Screen user interface. Currently enjoying a slight upgrade with the addition of themed Pages, most notably from YouTube and Eurosport, this remains a uniquely intuitive UI.

While the meagre selection of catchup services in the Viera marketplace isn't a deal breaker, it remains disappointing. On the plus side, the brand has introduced its own 4K streaming service, allowing 50/60Hz clips

to be viewed – provided your broadband connection is fast enough. A connection of around 50Mb/s is advised, so if you don't have fibre you might as well forget it.

Media playback from USB is excellent, with the set playing back most key file types, including MKV video and FLAC. Across a network, compatibility is a tad more restrictive. I couldn't play any MKVs from my NAS. The WT600 also supports a UHD-enhanced version of Panasonic's Swipe & Share DLNA technology. Mobile users can also mirror their device utilising Screen Mirroring, an implementation of Miracast.

Native performer

1 2 bc 3 det

4ghi 5jkl 6mm

7pgs 8tur 9mg

? 0 C

Panasonic

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To evaluate the screen in full native 4K, I hooked up a media server brimming with UHD content acquired by Panasonic and Eurosport. What makes this particular 4K collection interesting >







is that it's of a natively high frame rate. To play it out, I utilised the DisplayPort connection. While the WT600 may have been the first in line for an HDMI 2.0 input, it still has to wait until someone produces a source with a compatible output. That's not an issue with DisplayPort, which can deliver 3,840 x 2,160 content at 60Hz from a compatible PC graphics card.

The material, comprising show jumping and car racing, proves jaw-droppingly beautiful, both in terms of detail and smoothness.

Travelogue footage, including a weatherbeaten but richly detailed Rikers Island, as well as after-dark sequences of Las Vegas glittering

'The arrival of the world's first HDMI 2.0 screen is potentially a home cinema game-changer'

with pinpoint lighting, offers a level of screen realism that Full HD just doesn't come close to. It's like swapping out your double-glazing for prescription glass.

In truth I'm not entirely sold on the concept of HFR for all content. While the silky detail suits sports, I find it less acceptable for movies, as it removes the artifice that's become part of the lexicon of cinema and TV drama. It'll be interesting to see what the 4K iteration of Blu-ray will offer in this regard.

As an oversized Ultra HD gaming monitor, the panel is equally spectacular. Playing *Project Cars* at 60Hz via DisplayPort on a 65in screen is probably the nearest you'll ever get to a full-on race simulator. An increasing number

The TX-L65WT600 flaunts a slim chrome bezel and minimalist table-top stand

of graphics cards support 4K, including nVidia's Quadro and GeForce series, as well as AMD's Radeon HD 7000 and FirePro models. A growing selection of gaming titles should more than help pass the time until UHD video becomes more readily available.

In addition to native 4K, the set demonstrated its upscaling talents with Blu-ray and HD broadcasts. In addition to a database of 120,000 textures used to interpolate additional detail, demonstrated to great effect on the *Total Recall* Mastered in 4K disc, the screen also has a direct 1080p mode which applies simple linear pixel quadrupling. It's debatable, though, if the latter is actually better than the level of performance you'd get from a Panasonic ZT65 1080p plasma or Pioneer Kuro. Subjectively, I prefer the PDPs.

Black levels also don't quite match the reference depths of the brand's plasmas – although they are pleasingly stable, and the colour punch of this LED-lit panel is excellent.

The TV is 3D enabled and employs active shutter technology. While there is crosstalk double imaging evident, the set does a decent enough job of keeping stereophonic images clean and bright. For non-critical viewing, it's okay.

The TX-L65WT600 is the first 4K/UHD screen to really give a taste of tomorrow's viewing experience, and it's an extraordinary piece of kit. Presumptuously future-proofed with both HDMI 2.0 and DisplayPort 1.2a, Panasonic has produced a genuinely forward-thinking 4K TV. It also looks great in the living room and offers a superior connected experience. Even the price tag seems astonishingly reasonable ■

On the menu



→ The TX-L65WT600 is 4K THX certified and comes with two well-judged THX modes. There are also ISFccc modes for installers who want to offer a calibration service

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter, two pairs of glasses supplied ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,860 x 2,160 TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freeview HD; 2 x Freesat HD CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI (including 1 x HDMI 2.0); AV adaptor for component/Scart/composite; 3 x USB; digital optical audio output; Ethernet; SD card slot; DisplayPort 1.2a SOUND: 18W (2 x 4W, plus 10W woofer) BRIGHTNESS: N/A CONTRAST RATIO: N/A DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,468 (W) x 863(h) x 56(d)mm WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 38kg FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Hexa Processing Engine; Intelligent Frame Creation; apps portal; My Home Screen UI; 4K web browser; Skype; USB hard drive recording; USB media playback; DLNA media playback; SD card media playback;

4K Swipe & Share; Bluetooth touchpad remote

HCC VERDICT

control: voice interaction



Panasonic TX-L65WT600

→£5,400 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk → Tel: 0844 844 3899 HIGHS: Outstanding native 50/60Hz 4K image quality; HDMI 2.0 compatible; DisplayPort 1.2a compatible; excellent My Home Screen interface; high-quality upscaling LOWS: Mediocre audio performance; limited catch-up TV services





The sense of drama and excitement is enhanced by the ASB-2's ability to communicate the film's score. This level of musicality is difficult to pull off in a soundbar.









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Cambridge Audio's chocolate factory

Danny Phillips takes a bite of the UK brand's latest multichannel speaker system to see if its BMR driver technology suits his tastes



CAMBRIDGE AUDIO IS probably best known at the moment for its popular Minx compact speaker range, which uses Balanced Mode Radiator (BMR) drivers to generate a large soundstage that belies their diddy dimensions, and the success of BMRs inside the Minx models has led the boffins at Cambridge Audio's London research centre to ponder how they could be implemented inside bigger speakers. The result is Aero, a range of four new designs that combine BMR drivers with conventional cone diaphragms.

These BMR drivers take the place of traditional tweeters. This, reckons Cambridge Audio, gives the Aeros several advantages over competitors. Firstly, the crossover between the BMR and the bass driver happens at 250Hz, lower than the usual 3kHz where the human ear is more sensitive to any differences between the two.

Because Aero avoids this critical crossover frequency, it theoretically results in clearer, more coherent audio. And because the BMR drivers handle everything above 250Hz, the conventional cones can therefore focus on producing bass frequencies.

Another benefit of BMR-based speakers is that you can be less fussy about where they're placed. Regular tweeters create sound with a pistonic in-out motion, but BMRs combine this movement with surface vibration to offer wider dispersion — which could be useful in rooms with an unconventional layout.

System setup

On test here is a configuration that deploys a £350 pair of Aero 2 bookshelf speakers at the front, alongside the £250 Aero 5 centre, a pair of Aero 3 surrounds (£300) and the £450 Aero 9 subwoofer. You can swap the Aero 2s

for Aero 6 floorstanders (£650 a pair) if you're feeling flush.

The Aero 2 fronts are fairly chunky for bookshelf speakers, particularly depth-wise – I'd recommend investing in some good quality stands. Granted, they aren't the most aesthetically adventurous speakers around, but they have a neutrality that should play well in most living/cinema rooms. The lines are straight and clean and the plug-fixed black cloth grille on the front keeps everything low key. Behind it, rubber surrounds frame the BMR and single 6in cone. Overall build quality seems excellent, especially considering the relatively affordable price.

The centre channel enclosure employs one 2in BMR flanked by 5.25in bass units.

Versatility is the key word when it comes to the Aero 3 surrounds. Their two opposing 4in BMR drivers allow you to use them either >





The Aero 9 subwoofer is rated down to 21Hz and uses two 10in drivers – one active, one passive

as bipoles in a 5.1 setup, or as dual monopoles in a 7.1 setup, where one driver handles surround information and the other plays the surround-back channel. Two sets of binding posts on the rear make this possible.

The stocky, cube-shaped Aero 9 subwoofer packs a 500W Class D amplifier that drives a 10in front-firing driver, backed up by a passive

'A commanding performance with both movies and music makes this a superior speaker system'

down-firing radiator. On the rear are volume and crossover dials, a phase inversion switch, and stereo and LFE phono inputs.

Superheroic sonics

After introducing the Aero array to my Onkyo AVR and Oppo BD deck, it took control of my test room with real panache. From the moment Eiffel 65's *Blue* kicks in over the Marvel logo at the beginning of *Iron Man 3*, it was clear the setup meant business — the deep synth bassline, silky hi-hats and europop vocals immediately grabbed my attention.

During the movie's spectacular action scenes, the sound was big, powerful, exciting and all the other adjectives you'd expect from dedicated home cinema speakers. But what's really impressive is how effortlessly and cohesively it filled my room with sound, something I attribute to the BMR drivers. During the helicopter missile attack that obliterates Tony Stark's home, they create a vast, voluminous soundstage where explosions, crashing debris and music flood into the room and submerge you. From every channel comes a wave of sound that links up with the others to complete a tightly-integrated, 360-degree soundfield. This means you're soon immersed in the story – with smooth interaction between channels, tonal uniformity and a lack of harshness at high volumes, there's nothing here that'll yank you back into the real world.

There's no real weak link, either. The surrounds handle deep bass and high-frequency details as competently as the fronts, and the entire package seems remarkably powerful. The first missile slammed into Stark's house with a sustained rumble, accompanied by a hefty midrange. And as more ordnance pummels the superhero's pad, the sub shows off its slam and agility.

The woofer does, however, require thoughtful setup as it can quite easily swamp the soundstage when turned up too high. I was also slightly troubled when it started rattling wildly during certain parts of the movie. This may have been a fault with my sample, but does highlight how much raw power the cabinet has to contain.

High frequencies sound as light and airy as this system's chocolate bar namesake. Shattering glass cuts through the chaos clearly, while the bleeps and whirring noises as Stark suits up are rendered with impressive clarity. I have heard cleaner and more insightful detail from conventional tweeters, however.

Multichannel maestro

Switching to music, Cambridge Audio's 5.1 setup proves nicely adept. The title track of Roxy Music's *Avalon* on Super Audio CD (a re-mastered 5.1 mix) has a vibrant energy, with precise timing and accurate positioning of instruments within its multichannel soundstage. Warm guitars and saxophones drift in and out of the mix, intertwining with percussion and electronic swells.

This commanding performance with movies and music makes Aero a superior speaker system. The BMR drivers help deliver a big, cohesive 5.1 soundstage that fills a room better than most packages at this price, while its considerable muscle will leave you invigorated and entertained. It's not quite the last word in detail reproduction, but on the whole this is a sweet-sounding treat that fans of immersive surround sound should unwrap with gusto

SPECIFICATIONS

AERO 2 BOOKSHELF SPEAKER

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 2in BMR driver; 1 x 6.5in bass driver

ENCLOSURE: Front-ported FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 40Hz-22kHz SENSITIVITY: 90dB POWER HANDLING: 25-120W

POWER HANDLING: 25-120W DIMENSIONS: 203(w) x 370(h) x 311(d)mm WEIGHT: 6.8kg

AERO 3 SURROUND SPEAKER

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 4in BMR drivers
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 80Hz-22kHz
SENSITIVITY: 88dB
POWER HANDLING: 25-120W
DIMENSIONS: 461(w) x 180(h) x 151(d)mm
WFIGHT: 4 8kg

AERO 5 CENTRE SPEAKER

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 2in BMR driver; 2 x 5.25in bass drivers ENCLOSURE: Sealed

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 50Hz-22kHz SENSITIVITY: 90 POWER HANDLING: 25-120W

POWER HANDLING: 25-120W DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 150(h) x 208(d)mm WEIGHT: 6.1kg

AERO 9 SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in front-firing subwoofer; 1 x 10in down-firing ABR ENCLOSURE: Sealed FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 21Hz-200Hz ON BOARD POWER: 500W REMOTE CONTROL: No DIMENSIONS: 330(w) x 340(h) x 355(d)mm

CONNECTIONS: Stereo line input; LFE input

HCC Verdict



Cambridge Audio Aero 5.1

→£1,350 Approx → www.cambridge-audio.com → Tel: 020 7940 2200 HIGHS: Fabulously cohesive soundstage; powerful, articulate sound; solid build quality LOWS: BMRs lack a little refinement compared with traditional tweeters; subwoofer requires careful setup; boxy design



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Adding more D to BD

Oppo has called upon some third-party help to breathe more life into its mid-range Blu-ray player. **Mark Craven** gets to grips with Darbee Visual Presence

THE BLU-RAY PLAYER industry has reached a bit of a standstill. While we wait for a new 4K-enabled standard to surface, there doesn't seem much to be done in the way of improving upon current players. An indication of this is Sony and Panasonic's decision to continue the range-topping decks from 2012 into 2013. Tweaks to BD spinners in the last year have invariably been either linked to Smart features and media streaming, or audiophile upgrades designed to get the most from music material. With the BDP-103D, however, Oppo has done something a little different – it's integrated Darbee Visual Presence technology.

For those who don't know what that means, a quick explanation. Darbee is a $\ensuremath{\mathsf{US}}$

firm that likes to say things such as 'Buy our products - your eyes will thank you!' It manufactures the Darblet, an HDMI-equipped little box that sits between your BD player and your display. It's a video processor, only it eschews normal processing parameters - brightness, contrast, noise reduction, deinterlacing modes or colour balance - and focuses solely on the 'Darbee effect'. This uses real-time analysis of incoming video, and subsequent adjustment, to give images more pop – or 'visual presence', if you will. How it does this is all terribly technical. Darbee itself says it 'embeds stereoscopic depth cues and details into an image by modulating the local pixel luminance using our underlying patented method.' That's as much as you need to know.

The BDP-103D is essentially Oppo's superb BDP-103EU, only with an extra trick up its sleeve and an additional £100 on the asking price. Seeing as the Darbee Darblet retails for around £200, and comes in a curiously downmarket box, it's beginning to look like a bargain already. As long as you're interested in what Darbee can do.

Doppelganger disc-spinner

Aesthetically, the new Oppo is nearly identical to its non-Darbee stablemate. This means you get a full-width, solidly-built deck with a neat fascia. The only difference is the Darbee logo on the front.

Connectivity and features are the same, too – and they're rather impressive. There are



three USB inputs (one to be used with the bundled Wi-Fi dongle), twin HDMI outputs, and even twin HDMI inputs should you want to use the Oppo as a pre-amp/switcher.

The player will stream audio and video files from DLNA devices, upscale content to 4K, spin 3D BDs and accept Super Audio CDs and DVD-Audio platters. It's a fully-featured deck, in other words, with beautiful construction and a slick user interface courtesy of dual-core processing. See our review in *HCC* #215 for more on what it can do.

The only drawback to the BDP-103D is also the same as its predecessor – the Smart cupboard is a little bare. While mass-market brands pack all manner of catchup/streaming services, Oppo's highlights are BBC iPlayer, Netflix and YouTube. And, annoyingly, the home menu features icons for Vudu, Pandora and Film Fresh – services unavailable in the UK.

As for the Darbee effect, it certainly works, although consideration of how much you utilise it, and with exactly what sources, should be taken.

It offers three modes, named Gaming, Hi-Def and Full Pop. I found the latter two to be the most suitable, as Gaming proved rather aggressive.

The Darbee menu overlays on your screen when you hit the dedicated button on the handset. Here you can choose the mode, the

level of its impact (from 0-120%) and even view the pre- and post-processed images in split-screen. The latter is very useful to see exactly what's occurring. Note that the Oppo needs to be set to 1080p output for the Darbee suite to work.

With a BD copy of *The Cabin in the Woods* and the Hi-Def effect set to maximum, the shift in image quality was immediately noticeable, though not exactly pleasant. At this level, detail levels appeared too sharp, with an overly contrasted feeling and exaggerated noise. Dial it down to around 50/60%, though, and Darbee Visual Presence shows its benefits, with a subtle improvement in the picture's sense of depth, while character's faces and background details have a little more definition.

This is 1080p native material, of course, and some will prefer to leave it unfettered. SD sources are perhaps a better fit for the Oppo's software. Switching to *Dirty Harry* on DVD, I found that, again, sticking to no higher than around 60% yielded the most agreeable results; Clint Eastwood's loose-cannon cop strode around San Francisco with more, well, presence, seemingly lifted out of backgrounds.

Essentially, anyone thinking of buying an Oppo BDP-103EU should definitely check out this upgrade. That extra £100 gets you a neat toy to play with ■

On the menu



→ The Darbee interface pops up when you press the button on the Oppo's handset – cursor keys are then used to switch between modes and increase or decrease the strength of the processing

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes

UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K using Qdeo processor MULTIREGION: No. Region B BD/R2 DVD HDMI: Yes. 2 x v1.4 outputs (with ARC); 2 x v1.4 inputs (one front-mounted)

COMPONENT: Nó
MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE: Yes. 7.1
DIGITAL AUDIO: Yes. Coaxial and optical inputs
ETHERNET: Yes

BUILT IN WI-FI: No, but a USB Wi-Fi dongle is supplied

IS SUPPLIED
SACD/DVD-A: Yes/Yes

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD DECODING: Yes
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD BITSTREAM: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 79(h) x 311(d) mm

FEATURES: Wi-Fi via supplied adaptor; 3 x USB inputs; front-mounted MHL-ready HDMI input; media playback via USB and home network; Marvell Qdeo processor; Android App for remote control; USB extension lead supplied; picture parameter tweaks; 2D-3D conversion depth adjustment; YouTube, Picasa and Netflix channels; Roku Ready; Source Direct mode; rigid chassis construction; Gracenote support; external IR input; RS232 port; dual-core SoC; Darbee Visual Presence

HCC VERDICT



Oppo BDP-103D

→ £600 Approx → www.oppo-bluray.co.uk → Tel: 0845 060 9395 HIGHS: Excellent AV performance; great build quality; wide-ranging format support; Darbee Visual Presence processing LOWS: Video-on-demand services are underwhelming





A projector for joystick junkies

With its affordable new Full HD PJ, Epson is on a mission to make **John Archer** even more addicted to videogames. His wife ain't happy

AV Info

PRODUCT: Full HD LCD projector aimor

projector aimed at gamers

POSITION:Roughly in the middle of Foson

middle of Epson's home cinema projector range

PEERS:

BenQ W770ST; Optoma HD25; Epson EH-TW5910 **UNLESS YOU'RE ONE** of those weird PC gamers who thinks the zenith of gaming is to play exceptionally high-resolution games on tiny screens, you're probably of the opinion that quality games are best enjoyed on big screens. Especially now that a new generation of consoles is nearly upon us, promising even greater graphical prowess.

With this in mind I was excited to get Epson's new EH-TW5200 projector into my test room. Because, while it can certainly be used as a standard film/TV video projector, Epson claims to have designed it first and foremost as a gaming display.

With gorgeous-looking and immersive open-world games like Skyrim and GTAV spending an obscene amount of time spinning in our console drives, the thought of playing such material on screens up to 300ins across is rather mouthwatering. As long, of course, as Epson's affordable (£750) projector delivers the picture quality goods.

Coffee table compatible

The EH-TW5200's design is well suited to the relatively casual installations it's most likely to find itself in, thanks to a compact footprint that fits easily on a coffee table, or in a cupboard when not being used. It's attractive enough not to look out of place in a living room thanks to its sloping top, rounded corners and glossy finish.

Connectivity should satisfy most people, with a roster that includes two HDMIs, a component video port, a PC port and a stereo audio input feeding a speaker system with a whole 2W – count 'em – of audio power.

Not surprisingly 2W doesn't get you very far. The EH-TW5200's audio sounds tinny, distorts badly when set to its maximum volume and doesn't deliver a soundstage that's on remotely the same scale as the projector's images. Oh, and the projector's audio doesn't sound as if it's coming from anywhere near the pictures. But someone, somewhere, may appreciate its inclusion; having audio in the

projector serves a practical purpose if not's always convenient to hook your console up to a separate sound system for a gaming session.

The EH-TW5200 is a mixed bag when it comes to setting up. On the downside it only supports a very limited amount of optical zoom and carries no vertical or horizontal image shifting, leaving you almost certainly having to use keystone correction (which is essentially a distortion of the image) to stop your images from adopting a trapezoid shape.

At least the projector carries simple but effective drop-down rear and front legs to help you angle the image onto your screen, and you can adjust the keystone with a physical slider device on the projector's top edge without having to delve into the onscreen menus.

These menus are easy to read and straightforward in structure, despite carrying a pretty impressive collection of tweaks and adjustments that includes a colour management system, various settings for a dynamic iris (which adjusts light output to suit image content), and the thoughtful facility to switch the projector's image processing between 'fine' and 'fast' modes – with the fast mode streamlining things for speedier gaming response.

Even with this mode active, though, I measured a delay of more than 60ms between images leaving my source and appearing on the projector. This is around double what I look for on a good TV, and has the potential to marginally reduce your abilities with reaction-based games. At the same time, though, it's considerably less than the input lag witnessed on many other projectors, especially those from JVC and Epson's own Wireless HDMI home cinema models.

Settling down for long sessions of *Skyrim*, *GTA V* and *Forza 4* in the name of work, the EH-TW5200 quickly set about winning me over. Immediately I was struck by the extremely high brightness and vibrant colours delivered by its 2,000 Lumens Colour Light Output (CLO). Why CLO not brightness?

A cute-looking remote control – but not backlit









Keystone correction, focus and zoom are all adjustable from the top of the chassis

Because Epson's pushing a campaign to quote the brightness of colour reproduction rather than the usual approach of measuring the brightness of pure white, giving a more accurate sense of a PJ's true performance.

It certainly is impressive how rich and balanced the whole range of colours look on the EH-TW5200, rather than white being over-dominant and colours looking bleached, as can happen with low-cost LCD projectors. And, as well as helping images look alive and eye-catching, the EH-TW5200's well-judged brightness means games appear punchy even if there's ambient light in your room.

'A 480Hz drive system kicks in during 3D playback, giving you detailed, bright and well-saturated images'

Another appealing trait for gamers is that the Epson dishes out your favourite titles with a natural and unprocessed feel. There's no smearing around motion or when you pan around a landscape, there's minimal judder with moving objects, there are no serious processing artefacts, and best of all there's no trace of that 'running through treacle' sensation you get when gaming on some displays.

Fear of the dark

The EH-TW5200 delivers its images crisp and sharp on my 90in test screen, doing justice to the HD graphics and often huge draw distances of today's (and tomorrow's) gorgeous gaming worlds. Furthermore, dark

game sequences contain good amounts of shadow detail. This means you can't blame the projector if you're ambushed by something hiding in the shadows. Yet it is not a perfect gaming device. First there's a rather shimmery look to fine details, especially over distant objects, and a slightly stressed look to harshly contrasting lines. Second, while dark scenes contain plenty of shadow detail, they're also rather grey, indicating a lack of contrast at the projector's heart. This is confirmed by watching movies. Scenes in the Bat Cave in The Dark Knight Rises are milky when they should look black, and this has a negative effect on dark colours, robbing them of impact.

Double your delight

While 3D seems to be fighting a losing popularity battle, if you do try it here you'll be impressed. A 480Hz drive system kicks in during 3D playback, giving you detailed, credibly coloured and spatially accurate 3D images that are bright and well saturated. The only niggle with 3D is that you need to run the lamp in its Normal rather than Eco mode – causing the projector to run noisily as the cooling fans go into overdrive. And there are no free 3D glasses supplied.

In a perfect world the EH-TW5200 might be £50-£100 cheaper given that its shortage of contrast prevents it from being as much of a gaming and movie all-rounder as I would like. But if you're a gamer first and a movie fan second, there's no doubt that it provides an affordable way to enjoy your HD titles on an immense scale

SPECIFICATIONS

ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI, v1.4; composite video; stereo audio in and out, D-Sub PC port; RS232 control BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 2,000 ANSI Lumens (Colour Light Output)
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 15,000:1 dynamic DIMENSIONS: 297(w) x 105(h) x 247(d) mm

FEATURES: Fine/Fast processing modes; dynamic iris system; noise reduction option; colour management system; pictures optimised for gaming; 3D glasses optional (around £70 a pair); 1.2x optical zoom; keystone correction, MHL connection support via one of the HDMIs

HCC VERDICT



Epson EH-TW5200

→ £750 Approx → www.epson.co.uk

→ Tel: 0871 423 7766

HIGHS: Bright, colourful, crisp pictures well
suited to gaming; conveniently small and
attractive design; 3D works surprisingly well
WS: It runs a bit noisily; black level response

attractive design; 3D works surprisingly well **LOWS:** It runs a bit noisily; black level response isn't great; no vertical image shift; 3D glasses are optional extra





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Raising the bar high

If you want a soundbar that marries high-quality sonics with state-of-the-art connectivity and a sideline in audio streaming, **Danny Phillips** believes you should check out Monitor Audio's ASB-2

THE VAST MAJORITY of soundbars on the market are of the budget persuasion, marketed as simple, cost-effective upgrades for lacklustre TV speakers. Sometimes you get a soundbar that's cut from a different cloth, taking a more refined approach to design and sound quality. The ASB-2 from Monitor Audio is one of those.

The British brand's first soundbar is also packed with features. AirPlay and DLNA music are onboard, while a wide range of inputs makes it a versatile hub for all your audio kit.

Like the similarly sophisticated but pricier Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, the ASB-2 is blessed with stunning build quality and design. As soon as you pull it from the box its high-end pedigree is clear – the cabinet is heavy and feels supremely solid.

The entire front section is covered by a silky black cloth, broken up by only a light bar that changes colour when you switch source. Behind the cloth are two 5.5in woofers, two 4in midrange drivers and two 1in gold dome tweeters made from Monitor Audio's Ceramic Coated Aluminium Magnesium (C-CAM). Power is rated at a substantial 160W.

A supplied rubber table stand stops the soundbar slipping about, but it can also be

mounted on the wall using an optional bracket. Make sure your D.I.Y. skills are good, though, as the bar weighs in at a hefty 11.5kg.

Rear connections include three HDMI v1.4 inputs and an ARC-compatible output, plus optical, coaxial and analogue stereo inputs, a 3.5mm minijack input, a subwoofer output and a USB port that supports music playback from iOS devices. Compared to the strippeddown behinds of Bose's Cinemate 1SR and Sonos' PlayBar, it's positively overloaded.

Setup is carried out through an onscreen menu – a rarity among soundbars. The basic, blocky text is dated, and you have to press



right instead of OK to select an option, but it gets the job done.

Readying the ASB-2 for AirPlay/DLNA (there's no Bluetooth, unfortunately) is incredibly easy with a WPS router or iOS device — with the latter, simply connect via USB and share its Wi-Fi settings by tapping 'Allow' on the screen. PC setup through a web browser is trickier — my router refused to appear in the list so I gave up and used the peer-to-peer AirPlay Direct connection instead. Format support via AirPlay includes ALAC, MP3, AAC and FLAC.

Worth the money

Some people may question the wisdom of buying a £1,000 soundbar – an amount, incidentally, that could get you a decent receiver/speaker combo – but once you hear its sound quality, and consider the feature set, the price tag starts to make sense.

The ASB-2 is powerful and polished in equal measure, with punchy, authoritative bass, clear, decisive mids and jaw-dropping detail reproduction. In fact, it's the latter that sets the Monitor Audio apart. It digs out the sort of subtle textures that cheaper rivals gloss

over. This gives the sound an irresistible and absorbing silkiness and fluidity.

And in terms of excitement the ASB-2 mixes it with the best sound systems. Play the thrilling, chilling dénouement of *Children of Men* and the soundbar stages the action beautifully. As Theo weaves his way through Bexhill refugee camp in a single take, machine gun fire pops from the speakers with taut, pistonic bursts, while military vehicles rumble menacingly past the camera.

Explosions are big and visceral, and, after a brief ceasefire, the fighting fires up again and the ASB-2 shatters the silence with a fast, sudden dynamic shift. It's an extraordinary performance – insightful and layered but backed up with depth and a terrific sense of scale. Dialogue is clear and realistic, too.

The only drawback is the 3D Audio processing, which claims to add width to the soundstage but doesn't make much difference.

With tracks from iTunes streamed via AirPlay showing the same level of sonic refinement as BDs, it's easy to applaud the ASB-2. Monitor Audio has crafted a fine performer that proves you can cut down on clutter without compromising on quality

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 5.5in C-CAM subwoofers; 2 x 4in C-CAM midrange drivers; 2 x 1in gold dome C-CAM tweeters

AMPLIFICATION: 160W
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI inputs; 1 x HDMI
output (ARC compatible); optical and coaxial
digital audio inputs; stereo phono input;
3.5mm analogue input; phono LFE subwoofer

DOLBY TRUE HD/DTS-HD MA: No/No SEPARATE SUB: No REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 1,005(w) x 180(h) x 167(d)mm WEIGHT: 11 52kg

FEATURES: Onscreen GUI; stereo, 5.1 and 7.1 linear PCM support; wall or tabletop mounting; AirPlay, DLNA, UPnP music streaming; 3D Audio mode; 3D passthrough; Class D amplifier with five discrete power amplifier stages



HCC VERDICT



Monitor Audio ASB-2

→£1,000 Approx → www.monitoraudio.co.uk → Tel: 01268 740580 HIGHS: Commanding, detailed sound; supreme build quality; AirPlay and DLNA support; generous connections LOWS: Expensive; fiddly PC Wi-Fi setup; rudimentary onscreen menu; 3D Audio processing not worth bothering with



DALI EPICON 2

Escapism for the Mind

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KUBIK FREE is available in black, white and red. However, the fabric grilles are changeable so you can transform the colour of your KUBIK to match your decor. Further colours options will be available soon.







A bargain in one box

LG's tallboy setup offers heaps of features and a classy design at an affordable price



IN THE ALL-IN-ONE system numbers game, LG outdoes its enemies by offering a package that claims a channel count of 9.1 (but from a regular 5.1 set of enclosures), using upward-facing top drivers in its tower speakers and proprietary processing to expand the soundstage vertically. Samsung does something similar, but only up to 7.1.

Unlike Samsung, however, LG doesn't use towers at the back – instead it supplies living room-friendly compact speakers. Like its three competitors in this grouptest, those rears are powered from a wireless receiver plugged in at the back of the room.

LG's build quality is excellent for the money, putting its rivals to shame. Weighty and rigid, the lofty front speakers are a world away from the hollow plastic of some rivals, including the Panasonic system tested here.

The cabinets' gloss-black finish exudes luxury and contrasts beautifully with the orange Aramid Fibre cones. The top drivers are encased in a similarly dashing metallic cap, and the chic two-tiered main unit sports a brushed-metal top panel, touch-sensitive controls and a hidden disc slot. Nice.

Connections include an ARC-compatible HDMI output and two inputs, optical digital and analogue inputs, Ethernet and two USB ports (one front, one back).

The BH9430PW doesn't skimp when it comes to features. The built-in Wi-Fi connection lets you stream media content from PCs and NAS drives, while internet content is provided by LG's Smart TV portal. The Premium selection of the latter includes BBC iPlayer, LoveFilm, Netflix, YouTube and (uniquely) the music streaming service Spotify. Format support is the best of all four systems. It happily played all my test files, including FLAC and DivX HD. The only sour note is that it will only play MKV files stored on USB devices.

Joining 9.1 processing is 3D Sound Zooming, an audio mode that aims to emulate the movement of 3D pictures. There are loads of other presets to play with including Bass Blast, Clear Voice, Game, Loudness... but I'm sticking with Bypass.

Setup takes an age and there's no automatic calibration, but LG's crisp, boldlycoloured menus make manual configuration and general operation easy enough.

Powerful delivery

The LG array proves to be an absolute blast with movie soundtracks. Its sound is incredibly powerful (the 1,460W rating is the highest claim of all four systems) and the slightly bright, treble-heavy tone makes everything

sound brisk and lively, although audiophiles need not apply.

So when Smaug crashes into the dwarves' front door during The Hobbit..., or when the Stone Giants start their geological tête-à-tête. you really know about it. Crisp, forceful midrange and high-frequency effects are swept around the massive soundstage with relish, and despite the difference in size between the fronts and rears there are no jarring differences in tone as sounds travel between them.

Tightly integrated bass from the subwoofer lends admirable heft to Smaug and the Stone Giants' pounding footsteps, with little boominess during explosions and collisions.

It's not always the smoothest listen, sacrificing refinement for crowd-pleasing excitement. That's not a problem most of the time, but crank the volume up high and Smaug's powerful roar has a sharp, raspy quality. And because the LG goes very loud with the volume dial a little over half way, it's easier than usual to make it distort.

Also iffy is the 3D processing, which feels a little overpowering in the rear channels. The 9.1-channel mode is more successful. During busy action scenes I could sense the added height across the front soundfield and the soundstage was certainly more immersive.

The BH9430PW is a passable music player, handling Michael Kiwanuka's delicate folk-soul with surprising sensitivity for a one-box affair, although some of the sound modes on offer make it sound awful. Yet at this price, and with its bountiful feature set, it would be churlish to complain.

SPECIFICATIONS

UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

CONNECTIONS: HDMI output; 2 x HDMI inputs; optical digital input; analogue input; Ethernet; 2 x USB ports; FM aerial SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: No/No

DTS-HD/DOLBY TRUEHD DECODING: Yes/

CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 1,460W DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 446(w) x 65(h) x

294(d)mm WEIGHT (MAIN UNIT): 2.7kg FEATURES: 3D Blu-ray/DVD/CD playback; Bluetooth with NFC; 9.1-channel processing; 3D Sound Zooming; Audio Return Channel; wireless transmission for rear speakers; FM tuner; DLNA media streaming; USB media playback; LG Smart TV portal; built-in Wi-Fi; Miracast; Bass Blast, Clear Voice, Game, Loudness presets

Ride the Lightning

Apple fans will welcome the SC-BTT880's Lightning hookup – but does its sound also impress?

PANASONIC'S RANGE-TOPPING

ALL-IN-ONE system is no shrinking violet. With its tall, imposing tower speakers fashioned in space-age silver, the SC-BTT880 is a system that demands to be seen. Thankfully, it looks the part. The silver rings surrounding the drivers add glamour and the back-sloping base joint is a nice touch. The slim main unit, which combines a 3D Blu-ray deck and 1,000W LincsD amplifier, is jazzed up by angled sides and tinted fascia.

Sadly, the speakers' beauty is only skin deep. Close-up inspection reveals the cabinets are light and plasticky, lacking the heft and stability I'd like for the money. That's not unusual among all-in-one systems, but you'd expect better from a flagship model.

Some pride is restored by the excellent array of sockets. Pull down the front panel and you'll uncover a USB port and SD card slot, but the coup de gras is an iPod dock that supports the iPhone 5 and other Apple devices with the Lightning connector, something not found on the rivals here. Older Apple models can be connected to the USB port. On the back are two HDMI inputs and an ARC-savvy output. This doesn't support 4K upscaling (which isn't important) but does handle 3D (which isn't important) but does handle 3D (which isn't as second USB port for Panasonic's optional Skype camera are also provided.

Hate wires? Then Panasonic's got your back. On-board Wi-Fi lets you stream music from phones, PCs and other mobile devices (directly or through a router), while the supplied wireless rear speaker kit keeps cables confined to the back of the room. But there's no Bluetooth streaming.

Viera Connect zaps internet apps direct to your TV, but Panasonic lags behind its rivals. You get Netflix, BBC iPlayer, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, but that's where the good stuff ends. Samsung, LG and Sony have more compelling selections. The Viera Connect layout is also showing signs of age, spreading apps over a number of pages and moving with the urgency of a sloth on valium.

Format support via DLNA has a few gaps – no MKV or DivX – but you can play MKV from USB devices. On the music side, MP3, FLAC and WAV are welcomed but not WMA or AAC.

Whip open the box and you're hit by an avalanche of components. But once



assembled, the system is easy to use thanks to Panasonic's friendly onscreen menus.

Put to the test

With movies, the SC-BTT880 delivers a commendable performance, but perhaps not a group test-winning one.

With my ...Hobbit BD, the tower speakers' voluminous cabinets and twin midrange drivers are put to good use, mustering a big, fulsome sound that easily fills the room. Smaug's attack on Erebor feels suitably epic in scale – the dragon swoops dramatically between speakers and breathes fire with a rich, full-bodied rumble, while the score pounds away with terrific intensity.

Midrange and high frequencies are generally clean and sparkly, making the dwarves' chinking gold stash sound crystal-clear, although forceful noises honk at loud volumes – something others manage to avoid.

A proprietary 3D Cinema Surround mode conjures up 25 virtual speakers to accompany the five real ones, aiming to create a wider and taller soundstage, and it's worth trying out – non-directional effects hover above the listening position and beef everything up. You do lose some precision in the surround channels, though.

SPECIFICATIONS

UPSCALING: Yes. To 1080p CONNECTIONS: HDMI output; 2 x HDMI inputs; optical digital input; analogue stereo input; Ethernet; 2 x USB ports; SD card slot; FM aerial SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: No/No

DTS-HD/DOLBY TRUEHD DECODING: Yes/

CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 1000W DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 460(w) x 38.7(h)

x 279.3(d)mm WEIGHT (MAIN UNIT): 2.7kg

FEATURES: 3D Blu-ray/DVD/CD playback; 3D Cinema Surround; Audio Return Channel; wireless transmission for rear speakers; FM tuner; 5.1 channel amplification; DLNA media streaming; USB media playback; iPod/iPhone 5 dock with Lightning connector; Viera Connect portal; built-in Wi-Fi; web browser; LincsD-Amp; Digital Tube Sound; user EQ; Centre Focus

The weak link is the subwoofer, which lends depth to low frequencies but not with the same degree of tightness as its rivals. Overhang makes the sound a little laggy, which affects the timing of music playback more than movies. Add this to the average Smart platform, uninspired build quality and relatively high price tag, and the SC-BTT880 has its work cut out in this competition.

The premium proposition

Samsung's system boasts exclusive DTS Neo: Fusion processing – and a high price tag

THE HT-F9750W COSTS around twice as much as its grouptest rivals, the sort of moolah that could get you a pretty decent separates system. That's a lot to live up to.

Things get off to a good start with the design – it's a swanky-looking array with brushed silver and gloss black adorning all the components. The silver sleeve wrapped around the slim black Blu-ray receiver is an eye-catching touch, while a round porthole coquettishly teases you with a glimpse of the built-in valve amp. Generous rear connections include two HDMI inputs and an ARC-compatible output, plus one analogue and two digital inputs. A USB port lets you play an extensive range of file formats.

The looming front and rear towers ooze glamour, but the cabinets wobble easily when nudged. This isn't the rigid build quality I expect for the money.

Still, Samsung makes up for it with a jaw-dropping spec. It's the first system to employ a Gallium Nitride digital amp – a high temperature-tolerant material used in military applications – which kicks out a claimed 1,330W and teams up with the on-board valve amp to give the sound extra warmth.

Meanwhile, DTS Neo:Fusion processing combines elements of DTS Neo:X and Samsung's 3D Sound to add height to the soundstage, using the front speakers' swivelling top drivers to emit discrete, non-directional information when activated. The idea is that you get 7.1 sound from five speakers.

Samsung's 'net content knocks its rivals into a cocked hat. It's still the only brand offering all four key catch-up TV services – BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4OD and Demand 5.. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. There's also DLNA file streaming, Bluetooth, screen mirroring from Galaxy phones, a web browser, 3D support, 4K upscaling and wireless rear speakers. It's a formidable line-up.

Piecing together the myriad parts takes an eternity, then Samsung's ASC auto calibration adds another ten minutes. It's mostly accurate, although I needed to adjust the rear speaker distances. The slick, vibrant operating system is powered by a dual-core processor.

Colossal scale

Play a blockbuster Blu-ray and the HT-F9750W delivers a scintillating performance



by usual all-in-one standards. Most impressive is the colossal scale of the soundstage. During *The Hobbit*'s brutal Stone Giants battle, the towers' multi-driver arrangement completely immerses you in sound and thrusts effects into the room with glorious vigour – rocks clatter into each other with a fierce crunch.

Tonally, it puts the emphasis on excitement over refinement, which explains the slightly sharp edge to the mid and high frequencies – something its rivals tend to rein in. But that's also what makes the Samsung such an exciting listen, and thankfully it doesn't deteriorate at loud volumes – you can push the amp to its limits with barely any distortion.

The passive, non-wireless sub pulls its weight too, slamming dollops of deep bass into the room with barely any overhang. At the other end of the spectrum, detail presentation is gorgeous – the delicate background hum of Mirkwood's wildlife is clear and natural.

DTS Neo:Fusion further enhances the sense of envelopment. In the Mid or High settings, it adds palpable height and fullness to the soundstage. Purists won't be impressed, though, and it emphasises treble a little too much for my liking, but it's undeniably effective.

On reflection, Samsung's HT-F9750W is a staggering all-in-one system, boasting top-drawer performance and comprehensive features. But the big problem here is the price – yes, you get a lot of features, but I'm just not convinced the entire package warrants the £1,500 ticket.

SPECIFICATIONS

2Di Voc

UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMl inputs; HDMl output; analogue stereo input; optical digital input; USB port; Ethernet; FM aerial SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: No/No

SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: No/No DTS-HD/DOLBY TRUEHD DECODING: Yes/

CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 1,330W DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 430(w) x 55(h) x

315(d)mm

FEATURES: BD/CD/DVD playback; FM tuner; Auto Sound Calibration; wireless transmission for rear speakers; 7.1 channel amplification; DTS Neo: Fusion; nine sound modes; DLNA media streaming; USB media playback; App portal; built-in Wi-Fi; web browser; GaN and valve amp technology; dual core processor; screen mirroring via AllShare Cast; user EQ

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Short but sweet

No tallboy speakers here – just plenty of features and an assured multichannel performance



SONY'S FEATURE-PACKED 5.1 system eschews the tallboy speakers of its rivals for a less imposing design. The neat, gloss-back satellites stand 455mm tall and can be perched on shelves or furniture.

Inside, the drivers use Magnetic Fluid instead of a damper, allowing the coil to move more freely and, apparently, eliminating interference. It also makes them easier to squeeze into shallow cabinets, which is why Sony also uses it inside its 4K TVs.

Even more arresting is the BDV-N7100's main unit, by far the funkiest of all four systems. Its angled, forward-sloping Sense of Quartz design smashes the usual black box conventions. The top panel slides open to reveal the disc mechanism, while an alluring blue light and touch-sensitive controls adorn

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
CONNECTIONS: HDMI output; 2 x HDMI inputs;
optical digital input; analogue stereo input;
Ethernet port; FM aerial
SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: Yes/No
DTS-HD/DOLBY TRUEHD DECODING: Yes/

CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 1,000W DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 480(w) x 79(h) x 212(d)mm

WEIGHT (MAIN UNIT): 3.1kg
FEATURES: 3D Blu-ray/DVD/CD playback;
Bluetooth with NFC; All Front Sound; Audio
Return Channel; wireless transmission for rear
speakers; FM tuner; Auto Sound Calibration (via
supplied mic); Football and Berlin
Philharmoniker sound modes; DLNA media
streaming; USB media playback; Sony
Entertainment Network portal; built-in Wi-Fi;
web browser; Magnetic Fluid speakers

the right hand side. It's rather gorgeous, and connections are good too, including an HDMI output, which supports ARC and 4K upscaling, two HDMI inputs, optical digital and analogue inputs, an Ethernet port and FM aerial.

There are just four speaker plugs on the back – the other two are located on the wireless receiver that lives at the back of your room and keeps cables out of sight. Transmitter cards for the main unit and receiver are found in the box.

This impressive connectivity continues with built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth NFC support, allowing you to pair a compatible device simply by tapping it on the NFC symbol. Music can be streamed from PCs and NAS drives on your home network, too – it supports MP3, WMA and AAC but not WAV and FLAC. Although if hi-res audio's your bag, the Sony's Super Audio CD support might suffice.

Video support includes AVCHD, WMV, XviD and AVI, although some of my hi-def files played out in fuzzy low-resolution. Format support is better via USB, with WAV and MKV being added to the list.

Internet content comes courtesy of the superb Sony Entertainment Network. Must-have apps like BBC iPlayer, Demand 5, Netflix, LoveFilm and YouTube join quite-nice-to-have apps like BBC News and Sky News, while vTuner internet radio, Sony's Video/Music Unlimited and social networking clients fill out the vast selection.

You can browse these within the familiar Xross Media Bar menu, which remains slick but is now heaving slightly under the weight of Sony's expanding content.

While the Sony offers a solid feature count, it really smacks it out of the park where

performance is concerned. I started *The Hobbit...* on Blu-ray and ended up watching the whole thing all over again – testament to the system's absorbing, attention-grabbing sound quality.

Entrancing audio

The sonic signature here is one of crispness and composure – every scene sparkles with detail and rich background ambience, which left me entranced by even the most insignificant passages.

The sound of chirping birds and trickling water as Bilbo and company trot through the woods is just beautiful, and Howard Shore's score has rarely sounded silkier.

Skip to a more energetic scene and the Sony takes it in its stride. Its tone has less bite than both the Samsung and LG and therefore can't match them for sheer dynamism and power, but it still packs a punch.

The subwoofer lends deep, weighty bass to the bellowing roars and colliding boulders during the Stone Giants battle – although it could be a touch tighter – while the crack of splitting rocks is cleanly delivered.

Effects steering is swift and smooth, dialogue is projected clearly and the wide soundstage is further enhanced by the excellent 3D Surround mode.

What's more, you can turn it up loud without fear of giving your eardrums a battering – the sound retains its clarity and composure.

And with SACD playback showcasing a pleasing musical grasp, it's safe to say the BDV-N7100W is a hugely impressive system for the money. Fully-featured, well-built and great to listen to.

Final standings

THE BIGGEST ADVANTAGE of buying an all-in-one system is convenience — everything you need is in a single box, which means you don't have to shop around for a separate player, amp and speakers. And, as these four feature-packed systems demonstrate, you get a lot for your money, with media streaming, video-on-demand, wireless rear speakers and Bluetooth streaming typically on offer. Performance won't match a dedicated separates system, but can still impress.

With aching arms and a broken screwdriver, it's time to sit down and sum up the winners and losers of this one-box bust-up.

The wooden spoon goes to Panasonic's SC-BTT880, which isn't a bad system but falls foul of its rivals' superior features, performance and build quality. The subwoofer lets the side down sonically, while the limited internet content, lack of Bluetooth and lightweight speaker cabinets doesn't wholly justify the premium price tag.

I'm much more impressed by Samsung's mighty HT-F9750W and its phenomenal feature list, which includes exclusive goodies like the GaN/valve amplifier combo, DTS Neo:Fusion, ITV Player and 4OD. It also looks stunning and delivers a barnstorming performance with Blu-ray discs. The catch is the price tag. At £1,500 it costs around twice

as much as the other systems on test, without actually being twice as good sonically.

You're better off saving yourself a stack of cash and opting for its Korean counterpart, the £550 LG BH9430PW, which boasts the best build quality of the lot, an embarrassment of features and impressive 9.1-channel jiggery-pokery. It's an excellent audio performer too, but not quite the best of this quartet.

That accolade goes to Sony's BDV-N7100W, which has a smooth, detailed sound, but also packs enough power to get the adrenaline flowing. This polished sound is backed up by an excellent range of features (including Bluetooth and SACD playback), generous web content and gorgeous Sense of Quartz styling, all for a reasonable price. For these reasons, the Sony BDV-N7100W is a deserving grouptest winner

BUILD A COMPLETE SYSTEM



Find a flatscreen: These all-in-one packages offer an ideal gateway to the world of home cinema – all you need to add is a Full HD TV, and there are plenty of options available for those on tight budgets.

Bigscreen, small price: Samsung's PS51F5500 (reviewed on p72) is a 51in largescreen plasma TV available for around £700, and while you won't need most of its Smart TV talents once its hooked up to a modern all-in-one package, its picture performance is superb, with the 1080p panel offering well-contrasted, pin-sharp visuals. Rival Korean brand LG also makes eminently affordable plasmas, including the 50in Full HD PN650T (pictured).

Life begins at 40: As for LED-lit flatscreens, the 40/42in market is packed with good value. Samsung's 40in UE40F6400 – a previous grouptest winner – provides a sleek design, plenty of connective options and engrossing hi-def images for £600. The similarly-priced KDL-42W635A from Sony, meanwhile, may lack 3D, but its 2D performance is impressive. Panasonic, famous for its plasma TVs, is a key player in this price point, too – its TX-P42ST60 retails for around £750 and dazzles with its active shutter 3D playback and superior contrast.

HCC VERDICT

LG BH9430PW → £550 Approx → www.lg.com/uk → Tel: 0844 847 5454 HIGHS: Superb build quality; stylish design; dynamic performance; extensive feature list LOWS: Some straining at loud volumes; needs more catch-up TV apps



HCC VERDICT

→ £750 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk → Tel: 0844 844 3899 HIGHS: Impressive sound quality; Apple Lightning connectivity; stylish design LOWS: Speaker build quality fails to impress; limited selection of online content; no Bluetooth support

Panasonic SC-BTT880





Samsung HT-F9750W
→ £1,500 Approx
→ www.samsung.com/uk
→ Tel: 0330 726 7864
HIGHS: Big, exciting soundstage; tons
of features; stylish design; excellent
internet apps
LOWS: Too expensive for most;
plasticky speakers; DTS Neo:Fusion
processing is an acquired taste





Sony BDV-N7100W

→£650 Approx
→ www.sony.co.uk
→ Tel: 0870 511 1999,
HIGHS: Smooth yet dynamic sound;
stunning design; lots of features; good
internet content
LOWS: Not as aggressive as Samsung
or LG's systems; no ITV Player or 40D





Under UHD pressure

Can Toshiba's first Ultra HD TV of 2013 keep up with the 4K Joneses? **John Archer** runs through a gamut of sources – from football to *Titanic 3D* – to find out

AV Info

PRODUCT: 65in 4K/UHD TV

POSITION:

One of three 4K TVs in Toshiba's 2013 stable – the others are 58in and 84in L9 models

PEERS:Sony KDL-

65X9005A; Samsung UE65F9000; Panasonic TX-L65WT600 **THE LATEST IN** the new wave of UHD TVs, the Toshiba 65L9363DB, doesn't get off to the most auspicious of starts, as at £5,500, it's £500 more expensive than other 65in UHD/4K big-hitters from Samsung and Sony. And, although Panasonic's L65WT600 is also £5,500, that model sports a cutting-edge HDMI 2.0 port while the 65L9363DB does not. In other words, if it's going to justify its price, the 65L9363DB will have to perform better than its rivals — and that's quite an challenge.

Dressed for success?

The 65L9363DB loses out slightly in style terms versus rival UHD models thanks to its slightly plasticky build quality and relatively straightforward – if pleasingly slim – design. Put another way: Samsung and Sony sets, in particular, look smarter.

The TV doesn't employ any local dimming in its lighting engine, something I'm rather surprised about, considering its price. This is not necessarily the end of the world in picture quality terms, but there's no ignoring the fact that other high-end LEDs use local dimming tech to deliver a better contrast range.

There are some promising things about the 65L9363DB, though. Firstly, it carries Toshiba's brand-new UHD video processing system, driven by the company's long-renowned CEVO engine. Chief among this processing system's duties will be upscaling HD and standard-definition material to the screen's native resolution, as well as combatting LCD's perennial motion blur problems.

Secondly, in recognition of the 65L9363DB's high-end/enthusiast-baiting status, Toshiba has taken care to equip it with

a fearsome roster of picture setup tools, including full colour management, gamma controls and white balance fine-tuning.

The 65L9363DB is equipped with a fine suite of connections, including four HDMIs, USBs for playback of video, photo and music multimedia files from USB storage devices, an SD card slot, and both Ethernet and integrated Wi-Fi network connections.

The HDMIs are not, as I've already said, built to the new HDMI 2.0 standard. However, Toshiba assures us that its TV can be

'3D is the Toshiba's finest hour – I'm struggling to think of a set that's made it more engaging'

upgraded to handle 60fps UHD sources when they become available.

Attaching the TV to your network opens the door to both streaming multimedia from networked DLNA PCs, and accessing Toshiba's Cloud TV service – and the latter is as underwhelming as the last time I checked it out. Nice-looking, but a little starved of stand-out content, and curiously slow.

Taking centre stage

The 65L9363DB's rather B-list Smart TV offering piles even more pressure on the set's picture quality to impress. And it certainly does manage to rise to the occasion.

I kicked off my tests with a selection of native UHD content, taken from a high-spec laptop supplied by Toshiba and a Sony 4K demo server. And, as with every other time I've witnessed UHD in action, I was mesmerised by the sight before me. Pictures enjoy not just clearly more detail and resolution than you see with HD, but also a greater sense of density and depth, and these cause you to almost forget that images are being produced from a bunch of individual pixels rather than being 'real life'. Superb.

Equally gobsmacking with the HD test footage is the colour resolution the Toshiba serves up. Those extra pixels enable the screen to deliver near-flawless colour blends that further reinforce the almost 3D-like sense of solidity and depth of UHD. The extreme vibrancy of the 65L9363DB's colours, meanwhile, only fall slightly short of the ground-breaking saturations witnessed on Sony's Triluminos-sporting 65X9005A, and leave the tones of Samsung's UE65F9000 looking rather pallid by comparison.

A touch of motion blur takes the edge off UHD clarity during action footage like a football match, but while this is slightly more noticeable than it is on the rival Sony and

Samsung UHD/4K TVs, I wouldn't class it as severe. You can reduce its impact by selecting the low setting of Toshiba's highly-effective motion processing engine.

As an early glimpse of the power of the CEVO 4K engine, this motion smoothing is very promising, and my admiration grows when I switch to 3D material – *Titanic* (easily the best 'remastered' 3D title ever) and *Tron: Legacy*. As Jack pushes his way through the crowds on the dock at the side of the *Titanic*, the 65L9363DB does a remarkable job of handling the huge amounts of motion in the frame, avoiding the judder and twitching problems I've often witnessed with 3D screens.

In fact, 3D represents arguably the 65L9363DB's finest hour. Its passive 3D approach more or less nullifies crosstalk ghosting – even over notorious sequences like the first time Sam is fitted with one of the fancy striped light suits in *Tron: Legacy* – and its UHD resolution means it delivers the full 1080-line resolution of 3D Blu-rays rather than a compromised resolution, as HD passive 3D TVs do. Furthermore, the use of passive tech removes active 3D's flicker issue from the equation. I'm struggling to think of any other TV that's made 3D more engaging.

While the CEVO engine is on great form when it comes to handling motion, though, it's slightly less emphatic when upscaling standard-definition and HD sources to the screen's 3,840 x 2,160 resolution. Upscaled material certainly looks eminently watchable, especially with high-quality HD content like *Oblivion* on Blu-ray. But there's more softness in the presentation than you get with either Sony or Samsung's challengers.

What's more, if a non-UHD source has quite a bit of noise in it, such as all standard-def digital broadcasts and even a few HD ones, the 65L9363DB isn't as astute at reducing this noise during its upscaling process.

A final area of weakness for the 65L9363DB's pictures versus its rivals concerns black levels. Dark scenes are prone to looking somewhat greyed over, and there's a noticeable shortage of shadow detail in the darkest corners that runs counter to the TV's UHD ambitions.

No TV is an island

Considered in isolation, the 65L9363DB is another persuasive argument for adopting Ultra HD/4K technology – native content positively drips with detail and believability, and upscaled images are a clear improvement on Full HD. However, while its colour reproduction and 3D delivery is worthy of the highest praise, Toshiba's 4K set can't match its rivals in upscaling supremacy, black level performance or Smart TV talents. No TV is an island, and there's no escaping the fact that Toshiba's UHD model currently costs more than some models that are simply better

ON THE MENU



→ The Toshiba offers an extensive level of picture adjustments, including gamma controls and colour management. However, its Cloud TV interface (pictured) is not as speedy or content-packed as some rival systems

SPECIFICATIONS

ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160

3D: Yes, Passive

TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI (v1.4, one with MHL);
2 x USB; Scart; stereo audio; component video
input; Ethernet port; SD card slot
SOUND: 2 x 20W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 450cd/m2
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): 4,000:1
(native)
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,463(w) x
849(h) x 55(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 44.7kg
FEATURES: Native UHD playback; UHD
upscaling via CEVO processing engine; Cloud TV
online service including BBC iPlayer and Netflix;
multimedia playback from SD card, USB port or
DLNA; colour management; white balance
adjustment; gamma adjustment; four pairs of

HCC VERDICT

3D glasses included; built-in Wi-Fi



Toshiba 65L9363DB

→ £5,500 Approx → www.toshiba.co.uk → Tel: 020 3393 4158 HIGHS: Native UHD playback looks awesome; 3D is a revelation; superb colour reproduction and calibration tools LOWS: Black level response could be better; Smart TV service needs more content; slightly soft UHD upscaling



High-end audio excellence

Looking for an alternative to a full 5.1 rig but don't want to skimp on sound quality? Sony's flagship soundbar might just be the answer. Adrian Justins investigates



IF SQUARE SPEAKER drivers existed then Sony would have certainly used them for the HT-ST7, a soundbar that's got more hard edges than Jason Statham and more angles than a protractor factory. Even the remote control is a perfect oblong with triangular shaped buttons. And with substantial dimensions and considerable heft to both bar and subwoofer (not pictured) there is nothing subtle about the HT-ST7's look.

Build quality certainly can't be faulted, though. The 'bar itself is hewn from aluminium and rigid plastic, while the downward-firing 7in subwoofer is old-school MDF, finished with a 'quartz effect' plastic laminate.

The high-end theme continues with the specs. DTS-HD Master Audio and Dolby TrueHD decoding are on board and there are seven discrete amplifiers driving five 2.5in woofers in the centre, plus two more woofers and 0.8in tweeters for the left and right. With

AV Info

PRODUCT:

Premium soundbar/ subwoofer combi

POSITION:

Sony's flagship TV audio product

PEERS:

Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2; Monitor Audio ASB-2: Bose Cinemate 1SR 100W for the sub, the total power is 450W. Connectivity is exemplary for home cinema use with three HDMI inputs and one ARC HDMI output, plus other fallbacks.

Sony supplies an IR blaster should you find the soundbar obscures your screen's receptor. which could happen

considering the ST-HT7 stands 129mm with its feet. For wireless audio streaming from a tablet or smartphone Sony has provided aptX Bluetooth audio streaming with NFC.

Choose your flavour

There are plenty of acoustic adjustments on offer, with the remote sliding open to reveal more buttons. You can tune the sub's tone and volume, alter the dialogue level when listening to movies and choose a sound mode from Movie, Music, Football and Standard. Other options include a Sound Optimizer to improve low-volume playback by boosting clarity.

But why stick to low volume when the HT-ST7 does such a terrific job with Blu-ray soundtracks and is well suited to throwing multichannel audio out in to the room? Jack the Giant Slayer's dialogue is rich and clear, while discrete effects such as horses' neighing, clumping boots on cobbles and clanking castle gates have verve and just the right level of impact. The subwoofer is a perfect match, although it's essential to calibrate it manually or else risk dislodging your windows with the thud of the first giant's footsteps. Sony makes no attempt at generating virtual rears (thankfully) but the 'bar produces a terrifically dynamic sound with great clarity and balance. It's not such a pleasing performer with music, though, sounding thin and processed in its Music mode, or warm but somewhat narrow in Standard mode.

Overall, the HT-ST7 is a meaty, magnificent movie marvel that will do the job should you not want to invest in a 5.1 array ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 7 x 2.5in mid-range drivers; 2 x 0.8in tweeters AMPLIFICATION: 350W

CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMl inputs; HDMl output (ARC); 2 x digital optical audio; coaxial audio; stereo analogue phonos

DOLBY TRUEHD/DT A: Yes/Yes SEPARATE SUB: Yes. 100W, 7in downwardfiring with passive radiator

DIMENSIONS: 1,080(w) x 109(h) x 110(d)mm

FEATURES: Standard, Movie, Music, Football modes; Voice level selector; subwoofer tone control; wall-mounting option; wireless subwoofer connection; Bluetooth (aptX, AAC), NFC; DRC; AV sync; Sound Optimiser; AAV (advanced auto volume); 3D and 4K passthrough; display brightness control

HCC Verdict

Sony HT-ST7

→ £1,100 Approx → www.sony.co.uk Tel: 0844 324 7129 HIGHS: Hi-res Blu-ray audio decoding; good connectivity; easy to use; powerful, controlled sound; impressive movie playback LOWS: Not cheap; music performance lacks polish; substantial size; remote control isn't backlit



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HDMI Audio **Problem Solvers**

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Lets you insert an external audio signal (analogue or digital) into any HDMI signal. The HDMI signal is repeated to allow an extended total HDMI cable range. Supports HDMI Sample Rates up to 192 kHz, Optical Sample Rate up to 96 kHz, LPCM Stereo, DTS

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Code GV821 **£265.00**

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PERRE

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Code IPMSW1 **£119.99**

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Takes in HDMI and gives out Component Video (Y-Pb-Pr) and stereo audio allowing you to view on older component TVs or projectors that do not have an HDMI input.

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- HDCP v1.1 Compliant

Code HDCVC £69.00

HDMI Distribution **Amplifiers**

These Coosis HDMI Distribution amplifiers are compact devices that give multiple simultaneous HDMI outputs from one HDMI input, ideal for viewing on multiple displays. The units can also be cascaded together in a "pyramid" network to provide a one-to-many solution.

Please note: If the max resolutions of your displays are different, the EDID functionality will detect all the connected displays' EDID information and automatch the output resolution to the lower one. For example, if one display supports 720P resolution and the rest support 1080P, the signal will be lowered to 720p for all displays.

Code HDC12 1 HDMI input to 2 HDMI outputs

Code HDC14 1 HDMI input to 4 HDMI outputs

Code HDC18 1 HDMI input to 8 HDMI outputs

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Code VGAHDMIP £49.99





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The Smart budget choice

Martin Pipe tries a 51in Samsung plasma that won't break the bank



SAMSUNG IS FAMOUS for its high-end TVs (anyone for a curved OLED?) but, as the PS5IF5500 shows, isn't afraid to get its hands dirty at the budget end of the market. For a good chunk less than £1,000, this plasma gives you a helluva lot – 51 inches of screen real estate, Full HD resolution, active 3D support, onboard media player and Samsung's 'Smart Hub' technology, easily accessed by built-in Wi-Fi or Ethernet.

The dual-core processor ensures that the set's slick user interface is very responsive, a far cry from early smart TVs. Icons peel off or fly into the screen accompanied by sound effects. You can use the standard remote with its arrow keys, or the snazzier touchpad/voice control handset. Motion control, as seen on the high-end Series 8 plasmas, isn't offered here, as there's no built-in camera.

Sonically satisfying

The Samsung's audio transcended my

AVINFO

PRODUCT Full HD 3D plasma TV

POSITION: Mid-range – above the Series 4 PDPs

PEERS: LG 50PA650T; Panasonic TX-P50X60B expectations. It may lack truly deep bass, but this TV doesn't suffer from the hollowness that spoils many flatscreens and can go fairly loud without breaking up. It's hardly a substitute for a full AV rig, but it will certainly do justice to casual viewing.

More importantly, this affordable bigscreen delivers the goods visually. The default picture modes are fair, but after calibration the picture is transformed. Even with SD material (for example, an *IT Crowd* DVD), a surprising amount of fine detail is apparent.

Colours are balanced and realistic, while greyscales and dynamics are given a natural presentation. Switching to Blu-ray and HD TV broadcasts reveals similar characteristics, allied to the transformation in resolution that hi-def brings to the party. Even black levels are better than they should be at this price, with authentic, stable dark tones when required.

Superb though the picture may be in these respects, the Samsung's budget origins do shine through. Fast movement is accompanied by a slight but nevertheless perceptible judder; this was confirmed by a spin of the Spears & Munsil 'stock-ticker' test. Some might be inclined to believe that the result is endearingly filmic, though.

Finally, we have the 3D side of the equation – two pairs of RF-triggered active shutter glasses are supplied. A separate 3D processing mode is provided, and support for all key formats (frame-packing, top/bottom and side-by-side) is available. With a variety of 3D material ranging from test disc landscapes to *Prometheus*' 'star-chart' scene, the Samsung performs admirably, although not without some crosstalk errors.

Overall, the PS51F5500 represents great value for money – cracking pictures on a large scale, with Smart talents, too ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active **ULTRA HD:** No. 1,920 x 1,080 TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; 2 x USB; composite/ component; Scart; optical audio output; Ethernet **SOUND:** 2 x 10W BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: 'Mega DCR'
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,192(w) x 709(h) x 57(d)mm WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 18.5kg FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Samsung Smart Hub; dual-core processor; web browser; apps including iPlayer, 4oD, Facebook, YouTube; USB/ network multimedia playback (including MPEG2, DivX/XviD, MP4, MKV, WMV, JPEG, MP3, AAC, WAV, WMA and FLAC); 3D Hyper-Real Engine; 600Hz Subfield Motion; Black Optimiser; Cinema Smooth; film mode; Wide Colour Enhancer; two pairs of 3D glasses supplied; Samsung Smartview mirroring; Skype (with optional camera); voice-control

HCC Verdict

Samsung PS51F5500

→£700 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk → Tel: 0330 7267864 HIGHS: Superb picture quality for the price; sounds better than some more expensive sets; excellent Smart functionality LOWS: Motion judder (no Samsung 'canceller' at this level); AV connectivity could be better; USB disk recording format PC-incompatible







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Blu-ray's soft option

Martin Pipe considers a Blu-ray player that's more obsolescence-proof than most – it runs on your PC

MICROSOFT'S WINDOWS 8

operating system cannot even play DVDs - never mind Blu-rays. This seems strange, as modern PCs are more than capable of handling movies from disc, and can be connected to your AVR and display with the same ease as a conventional Blu-ray spinner. The basic (and free to install) VLC media player can deal with DVDs and Blu-rays

amongst other things, but if you want more sophistication then Cyberlink aims to please.

This is the latest incarnation of a product that still goes by the quaint name of PowerDVD, but can do much, much more than spin standard-def platters, including handling Blu-rays and UltraViolet content, pulling media from DLNA servers on your network, giving you access to locally-stored video, music and photos from a library and even nudging you in the direction of YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and the 7Digital music store.

As with VLC, the in-built media player is compatible with many different codecs and formats, including Monkeys Audio (.ape), the lossless FLAC alternative. It also plays both SD and HD recordings of TV programmes in transport stream format, although these have to be captured from a PC's digital TV tuner via another program, as PowerDVD itself doesn't support such tuners.

AV Info

PRODUCT:

Software-based CD/ DVD/Blu-ray and multimedia player

POSITION:

Tops the current Cyberlink range

PEERS: VLC Media Player

While newer PCs can harness the power of a graphics card to do video decoding in hardware, PowerDVD 13 gives you its own high-quality software alternative – together with a TrueTheater mode that aims to improve all content (even HD).



Meanwhile, 2D-3D conversion is a useful complement to the software's ability to handle 3D Blu-rays. Audio can be decoded, or passed in bitstream form to your AV receiver.

Feature-packed

Neat tricks of the Cyberlink package include disabling of BD-Live for faster loading; support for external subtitles

for video files; movie information retrieval from an online database; and an iOS/Android app that allows you to drive the system via Wi-Fi rather than your PC's keyboard/mouse. A mini media player for smartphones is also offered, and owners of Windows 8 notebooks without disc drives can download a 'mobile' version. It's also possible to transfer noncopyrighted content to your smartphone via USB. All this is wrapped up in a smooth and attractive UI.

But there are caveats. The smartphone app lacks dedicated controls for selecting DVD or Blu-ray menu options. Instead, you have to use its 'mouse' mode to select a supplementary control panel that can be controlled by your mouse. Ridiculously cumbersome. Another criticism of the app is that your content isn't listed onscreen for selection — which would be useful for display-free music playback.

However, as a media player PowerDVD 13 works great after setup. With default hardware video decoding, picture quality – notably SD – was found to be rather plasticky. Cyberlink's software decoding is noticeably better – easily as good as a decent Blu-ray player. It does draw heavily on your CPU, though. Also aiding picture quality is the fact that refresh rates can be set to change with the source material, thereby avoiding conversion judder. The sound quality of Cyberlink's audio decoders was fine, too.

Overall, a powerful and versatile media player – but check first whether VLC fits your requirements

SPECIFICATIONS

FORMAT SUPPORT: CD; Blu-ray; DVD; DivX/ XviD; FLAC; MKV/X.264; MP3; MPEG-1/2; FLV; AVCHD (2D/3D); MP4; WMA; WMV; BMP; JPEG; AAC (2 and 5.1-channel); WAV; APE; TS; 3D photos; Dolby Digital/Plus/TrueHD; DTS/96-24/

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS (BLU-RAY 3D):

Windows XP SP3/Vista/7/8; Intel Core i5/AMD Phenom II X4 processor; 2GB RAM; Intel HD Graphics/ATi Radeon HD5000/nVidia Geforce 9500GT graphics; 400MB of HDD space for software

FEATURES: BD-Live bypass; dedicated movie library (with info button); display file-based movies with cover art; versatile subtitle support; free PowerDVD Mobile (iOS/Android/Windows 8) and Remote (iOS/Android) apps; TrueTheater HD with higher-than-HD upscaling; instant-start for photos, video & music; mini music player; TV refresh rate auto-synced to DVD frame rate; 5.1/7.1 audio decoded or passed to HDMI; 'instant-seek' buffering for previewing during seeking; zoom; YouTube and Flickr (with upload); Facebook integration; online music store; DLNA networking (share and stream); media library; grab stills from video

HCC Verdict

Cyberlink PowerDVD 13 Ultra

→ £100 Approx → www.cyberlink.com

HIGHS: Versatile features and format/media support; speedy disc-loading or media location; excellent sound and picture quality potential LOWS: Some aspects of user interface need work; fast PC needed for software HD decoding; smartphone transfer/transcode didn't work





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The Network Innovation

DAC's the idea

Ed Selley buffs up his digital tunes

HAVING LEFT THE DAC market alone for the best part of twenty years, Arcam is making up for lost time with an increasingly extensive range. The latest arrival is the irDAC that replaces the earlier iDAC. While it looks similar, the irDAC boasts more inputs (which are now 192kHz capable) and is completely revised internally to include a new DAC chip, improved jitter reduction measures and extensive power supply arrangements.

One useful feature in terms of using the Arcam in an AV system is the presence of a remote control that allows for input selection from your seat, which is something most of the competition at this price don't have. Another useful convenience feature is that, via USB, the track skip commands will control many pieces of music software. Convenience shouldn't be the reason you choose the Arcam, though. The performance is genuinely excellent across all the inputs available (USB, coaxial, optical).

Refined sound

The Arcam irDAC manages to retain the good points of the older rDAC, in that it is forgiving and refined with a huge variety of music and has a warmth and detail with voices that makes it very easy to listen to for long periods. Where the irDAC differs, though, is that it provides a sense of excitement and drive to more up-tempo and aggressive music that the older models never seemed to be able to generate - the clever part of all this is that the irDAC can sound lively and exciting but avoids tearing bright or poorly-recorded material to shreds while it does it.

In terms of weaknesses, only a very slight lack of bass weight counts against it. If you are looking for an outboard DAC under £500, you simply have to hear this one.



SANDSTROM S47S13 → Approx £80

Sonic solution that saves money

John Archer auditions a slim-line sound bar that promises plenty for not a lot



No subwoofer here
– just four mid-bass
drivers and two tweeters

EVERY NOW AND then a product comes our way that makes us wonder how its maker can possibly be earning any money on it. The Sandstrom S47S13 is one of those products.

Available exclusively from Currys, the S47S13 is a soundbar speaker designed to partner 47in TVs or larger. It carries six drivers – four mid-bass devices and two tweeters – and serves up 60W of power.

It also boasts a pleasant burnished black metallic finish offset cutely by the gleaming silver mid-bass drivers, while its connectivity extends to Bluetooth and NFC support, an MP3 input, an optical digital audio input, and a 3.5mm input with provided adaptor.

The price for all this is just £80. It can't possibly sound good, can it?

Fed the demanding soundtrack to *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, the S47S13 does struggle in places. The large dynamics of the early dragon attack reveal a fairly brittle bass performance, with only limited lower-frequency extension and a tendency to cramp the soundstage when the going gets tough.

However, with more straightforward material the S47S13 does perfectly well. The mid-range is open and wide enough to handle male and female voices with clarity and authority, and trebles sound clean and seldom harsh. There's plenty of detail in the soundstage too, and the 2.0-channel sound spreads quite widely without losing cohesion, ensuring the soundstage both matches the scale of your TV pictures and sounds like it's

coming from the screen rather than the speaker bar.

Naturally you can get more features, more inputs and more quality if you're willing to spend more. But Sandstrom's S47S13 certainly delivers an upgrade on any mainstream integrated flat TV sound system, and that's probably more than enough in itself to justify the £80 ticket.





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The award-winning Home Entertainment specialist

Accessorize me! Music streaming services

Gordon Kelly tests six streaming platforms that promise to have him deleting his digital library in favour of music-on-demand

WHILE THE DIGITAL music revolution may have killed the CD (or at least given it a damn good hiding), the MP3 is not the final say in easy audio. One significant step beyond are streaming music services that promise to not only give users unlimited access to millions of tracks, but offer this monthly for the cost of downloading a single album.

It isn't just quantity and economy that appeals here, however — streaming services are ubiquitous. The playlists made on one device automatically synchronise to others, and you can use your login credentials to playback music on a friend's equipment

or your work machine. Phones, tablets, laptops, desktops, web browsers, Smart TVs and AVRs can all build in support for an array of music platforms.

'Music services offer access to millions of tracks for the cost of downloading a single album'

Making it personal

Of course, vast digital libraries don't necessarily inspire discovery of new artists, so streaming services also provide personal recommendations. These can range from curated content and release highlights, to suggestions based on everything from historical listening habits to current mood.

Happily, while this new business model is fast headed for the top of the food chain it also brings a lot of competition. Here we've rounded up six of the hottest streaming services on the market to help you sort the perfectly pitched from the off-key.

£10pm ('Premium') → www.spotify.com

Spotify

The streaming service that's everywhere



SPOTIFY WASN'T THE first streaming music service and it

certainly won't be the last, but since its launch in 2008 it has become the runaway leader.
On close inspection it is easy to see why.

For starters, the Swedish company has created an exceptionally strong backbone to its service. It lists over 20 million tracks from every major record label and numerous independents and the vast majority are available in 'high quality' bitrates of up to 360Kbps. The fact these tracks are encoded in Ogg Vorbis, a far more efficient codec than MP3, also means they sound superb and are almost impossible to separate from a CD.

And yet this isn't the reason Spotify is so successful. As rivals mature they are offering similar libraries and many at similar price points, so instead what differentiates Spotify is its ubiquity. Simply put, Spotify is everywhere. It works on PC and Mac, in web browsers, on

just about every smartphone, some smart TVs, and audio products from the likes of Sonos, Pioneer and Onkyo.

Social media is also slickly embedded into Spotify's DNA. Facebook integrates with Spotify to share music with your

friends, follow friends' listening habits and even track the predilections of your favourite bands and celebrities.

Uniquely, Spotify has also built its own app store with big-name partners ranging from NME, Rolling Stone, Pitchfork and The Guardian, to small third-party developers integrating music guides, jukeboxes, karaoke lyrics, concert times and even playlists based on your mood. This potential to help you discover new music is unparalleled.

But Spotify still isn't perfect. Your collection relies on playlists which don't sort automatically and quickly become messy. You



can't access the mobile service for less than £10pm and its apps only work on the downloadable PC client.

Some of Spotify's weaknesses offer hope to its rivals, but so far it remains the most complete streaming service available.



Rdio

Organising your tunes has never been easier



RDIO IS WHAT

the creators of illegal file-sharing service

Kazaa did next. Having seen Napster make the transition first the move drew far less attention, but arguably since Rdio went live in August 2010 – and in the UK this year – student has outshone teacher.

Like Spotify, Rdio has amassed a library of over 20 million on-demand tracks from every major label and many independents. It also carries the same pricing structure, although once the short free trial expires it only works as a cut-down radio service akin to Last.fm. But the similarities don't end there.

Rdio also offers wide availability with apps for virtually every smartphone, plus PC, Mac and browser support and integration with Sonos and Roku systems. Rdio doesn't have the same level of smart TV integration as Spotify, but this isn't the most critical area to fall short. On all platforms Rdio has a smart, clean and

intuitive design that really gives Spotify a run for its money.

Furthermore when it comes it organising your music Rdio doesn't just run Spotify close, it blazes past it. Rdio offers 'My collection' which supports both

custom playlists and music added by artist and album. These can be sorted alphabetically, by artist, album, year or genre, making browsing a doddle. Spotify take note. Rdio also mimics Spotify's social media options with Facebook integration and the option to follow friends, bands and celebrities' listening habits, although it isn't as mature.

So far so good, but sadly Rdio has a significant caveat: music quality. Officially Rdio refuses to disclose its music bitrates saying only that it 'experiments with different rates and encoding formats' but the long and short of it is tracks regularly sound better on rival services. It is widely reported 192Kbps is the



maximum quality Rdio offers and while casual listeners won't mind it will scare off anyone who cares enough about music to invest in quality gear.

Rdio must address its audio quality, as it is by far the biggest element holding it back from being a genuine title contender.



£10pm ('Unlimited Plus Mobile') → www.napster.co.uk

Napster

Long in the tooth, but lacking in quality



THIS NOTORIOUS INDUSTRY bad boy launched its illegal

file-sharing service way back in 1999, but collapsed in 2001 after agreeing a \$26m settlement in unpaid royalties to record labels. Numerous purchases and sales of the brand and changes of business model since mean only its name is connected to its nefarious past. Despite this, Napster – now part of parent company Rhapsody – has found its footing in the world of legal music streaming.

Napster isn't here to make up the numbers and it boasts a (familiar) library of 20 million tracks – a figure so large it is hard to find discrepancies between services, regardless of genre. Napster also walks a well-trodden path when it comes to pricing: £5pm for unlimited audio on Mac, PC and web browser and £10pm for adding access on mobile devices. There is no free ad-supported option, but it does offer a 30-day free trial.

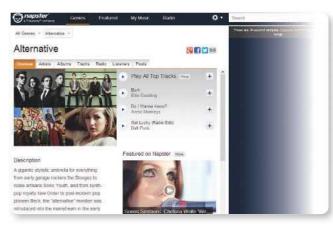
Yet parity with its rivals ends here. Availability is good with Mac, PC and browser support but mobile apps are limited to iOS, Android and the Nook eBook reader (a curious priority). Meanwhile hardware support includes Sonos

speakers and Yamaha AV receivers, while LG and Loewe Smart TVs also offer apps.

Unfortunately, the quality of the apps that are available is inconsistent. While mobile apps are basic but attractive, the browser-based user interface is dated and has been slapped multiple times by the ugly stick. Social media integration is also limited to posts and status updates.

Equally concerning is sound quality.

Taking a leaf out of Rdio's book, Napster tracks are similarly stuck to 192Kbps, meaning those with sound quality concerns should probably keep moving along.



Napster's illicit beginnings famously kickstarted the digital music age, but in its current state it looks like an old timer that desperately needs bringing up to date. There are better platforms available for the same price.



Last.fm

Yes, it's affordable – but is it worth it?



LAST.FM LAUNCHED IN

2002, but unlike many contemporaries of the time it began as a fully legal streaming service. Unlike most of these contemporaries it is therefore still in business in 2013, but with competition intensifying it now faces the biggest fight of its existence.

The reason for this is the Last.fm service model remains largely unchanged in more than a decade. Users sign up, tell it musicians they like and Last.fm compiles a personal radio station where you rate songs to continually fine-tune its suggestions. Choosing to play specific tracks is limited to 30-second clips.

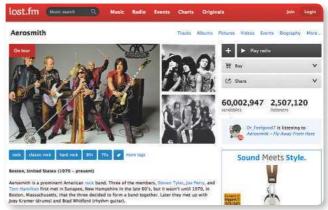
In the current era this approach seems almost quaint, but it succeeds on two significant fronts. Firstly, Last.fm's smart algorithms remain among the best in the industry, making it a great music discovery tool. Secondly, it is free to use in web browsers with occasional ads and just £3pm to access it

ad-free on a huge variety of other platforms. These include all major smartphone operating systems, smart audio systems including Sonos and Logitech, and plenty of home cinema separates.

Last.fm sweetens the deal further with a selection of free music downloads from a wide variety of artists. These are usually less well known musicians, but it is nonetheless welcome.

All this has rightly gained Last.fm a loyal following, but the limitations to the service are really starting to show. Both mobile and browser apps look dated and audio quality is barely better than digital radio. Last.fm has a maximum bitrate of a meagre 128kbps and uses the equally aged MP3 codec, making it by far the worst audio quality in the sector.

Even Last.fm's pricing comes under scrutiny (especially compared to Bloom.fm). £3pm



isn't a lot, but smart radio these days is just one aspect of other modern streaming services, a point emphasised given Last.fm is also an app for Spotify. Overall, this cult service is so limited in functionality and audio quality that it's hard to recommend.



£10pm ('Premium+') → www.deezer.com

Deezer

Relaunched and ready to rock



LIKE NAPSTER

AND Rdio, Deezer is another streaming

service with a nefarious past, albeit a short one. The French service launched in April 2007 without royalty agreements and was forced to shut for four months before relaunching in a reduced form. It took until 2011 to agree deals with all four major record labels, which let Spotify leap ahead despite launching a year later. Now Deezer is ready to fight back.

The overall proposition is very similar to the Swedish industry leader. Deezer offers three subscription plans: £4.99pm for web browserbased streaming, £9.99pm for web and mobile streaming and a free ad-supported radio-only 'Discovery' mode. The latter gives unlimited access for 12 months then cuts listening to just two hours per month.

With its royalty hassles out of the way Deezer claims a library of 25 million tracks and makes an immediate impression with a neat browser

and mobile apps. Nice differentiators here are a huge selection of pre-existing radio channels (more than 30,000 are available)

and the inclusion of an adjustable equaliser something absent from every other app.

The equaliser isn't the only signal of acoustic intent, either. Deezer joins Spotify in being the only other streaming service to offer 320kbps playback and tracks sound extremely detailed and sharp.

Deezer also offers Facebook integration to follow listening habits and share music with friends, but lacks the depth of integration of Spotify and its unique app platform. Device support isn't extensive either with iOS, Android and web browser apps, and just LG, Samsung and Toshiba Smart TV apps on the way.

In fact this is a common trend with Deezer: it does everything well, but not quite as well as



its biggest rival and where it does excel Spotify can match it. The 'My Library' feature also doesn't organise as cleverly as Rdio's 'My Collection'. Rdio is easier to use; Deezer has the edge on audio quality.

So, while being the only service to equal Spotify's sound quality, the rest of its offering doesn't quite match despite costing the same.



Bloom.fm

Music in the palm of your hand



BLOOM.FM ONLY STARTED

life this year and rises from the ashes of short-lived music download site Mflow. Yet despite

a mix of youth and questionable roots, it is fast becoming the service others are watching nervously over their shoulders.

The primary reason for this is pricing. Bloom.fm can match Last.fm with free unlimited smart radio streaming with intermittent ads, then beats it by dropping the ads, adding playlist creation and up to 20 temporary downloads for £1pm. £5pm gets 200 downloads. At £10pm it takes on Spotify, Rdio, Napster and Deezer with unlimited downloads, radio and a full-on streaming service. Interestingly all these costs are for using Bloom.fm on Android and iOS devices, making it the only service to provide mobile access available at every price point.

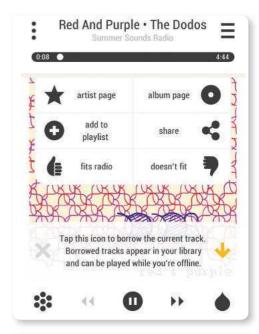
Crucially Bloom.fm has also nailed its mobile apps. Extending the theme of its name,

they are designed around a sunflower, the centre representing your selection and the petals related options – for example, genre and sub-genres or artist and related artists. Select a petal and it moves into the heart of the sunflower, which sprouts new relevant petals. It is wonderfully intuitive system, beautifully animated and unlike any music app I've ever seen.

But Bloom.fm still (to continue the pun) has plenty of room to grow. For starters it is the only app not to have secured all four big music labels; Warner Music holds out and talks are ongoing. Despite this it still lists 22m tracks thanks to a wealth of independent label deals.

On top of this audio is limited to 160Kbps (though using the efficient AAC codec) for free access and only jumps to 256Kbps for paid subscribers. Bloom.fm also lacks any form of desktop app and Apple's App Store prices carry a premium, coming in at £1.49pm, £6.99pm and a hefty £13.99pm – making Android far more appealing. Bloom.fm blames the Cupertino company's larger developer cut.

Bloom.fm is definitely one of the most exciting streaming services around today. Its limitations (particularly a lack of hardware integration) keep it from being the best, but it's one to keep an eye – and ear – on.





Final standings

WHILE SOME STICK with physical discs and others build up libraries of digital music, a streaming service gives you a massive selection for very little outlay. Yes, you don't 'own' tracks, but you can listen to them whenever you want. But which of these six platforms should get your monthly subscription fee?

Even with growing competition we found there are good reasons **Spotify** why remains the most well-known music streaming service. Its ubiquitous availability, polished apps, unique app developer platform and keen pricing make it extremely appealing and only **Deezer** (which needs to tweak its usability) can match it for audio quality. Spotify's ongoing dependency on unsorted playlists remains a major bugbear, but it is one the company has already confirmed it is working on.

That said, challenges to Spotify are bunching up behind it. **Rdio**'s user friendliness, Deezer's audio fidelity and **Bloom.fm**'s innovative design and pricing will see them appeal to different audiences, and they are incredibly difficult to separate.

Picking a runner-up behind Spotify, Bloom.fm excites us most of the chasing pack given its more unique approach. Provided it rectifies the glaring omission of Warner Music from its catalogue it can become a significant alternative by offering genuinely different design and pricing models. Conversely, the problem for Rdio and Deezer is they follow the Spotify model so closely it is hard to see how they can do anything majorly different to win over Spotify customers.

As for Napster and Last.fm, they are starting to feel their age. **Napster** needs a redesign and sizeable bitrate upgrade, while **Last.fm'**s personalised radio stations are fast becoming just one aspect to more fully featured streaming services.





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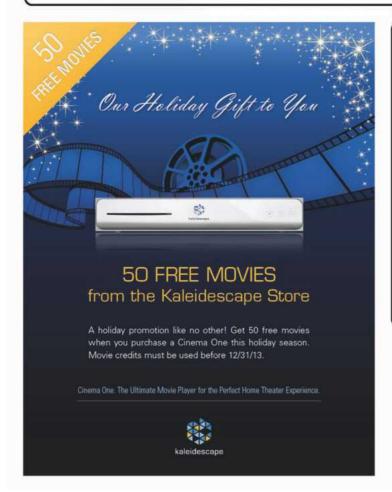
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DIGITAL COPY

Mark Craven is all in favour of the new drive towards high-resolution audio, but reckons its lack of standards – and limited content – could hold it back

A FEW WEEKS ago I attended an industry preview, organised by Sony, for its new range of High-Resolution Audio products — a collection of stereo separates, headphones and speakers gathered together under a new banner. The basic message was that in the digital age, quality doesn't need to be sacrificed in place of convenience, and that we can all do better than MP3.

Hear, hear, I say. And, er, good luck – because as campaigns go, it could be a tricky one.

Firstly – and I know this may seem like stating the bleedin' obvious – there is no such thing as a standard High-Resolution Audio file. This is unfortunate, as consumers love formats, love getting behind them, or slagging them off, or reading about one being better than the other. Yet burrow down into Sony's promotional literature, or take a peek at its High-Resolution Audio web portal (www.sony.com/hires), and you'll discover that the company's hardware that bears the High-Resolution Audio label simply offers compatibility with FLAC, WAV, AIFF, DSD (DFF) and DSD (DSF) digital file formats. To the uninitiated, it looks like an explosion in an acronym factory.

Furthermore, Sony is vague as to what the term High-Resolution Audio means. On its websites, you can find the phrase 'high-resolution sound is normally 24-bit/192kHz' closely followed by 'High-Res Audio... is typically referred to as "96kHz/24bit" or something higher'. Then later on, you're told that 'High-resolution audio generally refers to music data with a volume of information exceeding that of CDs.' It's hardly confident-sounding stuff.

Once Joe Public has accepted that High-Resolution Audio is an umbrella term rather than an actual thing, his next question is obvious. 'Where can I get it? And here, Sony can't actually help — the Japanese brand will sell you the relevant hardware, including its range-topping HAP-Z1ES Wi-Fienabled 1TB audio player, but it's up to you to find the music to play on it.

Thoughtfully, Sony's web portal provides links to hi-res audio dealers, including 2L, Linn Records, Naim Label and HD-Klassik. Yet click the latter and you arrive at a German language site offering FLAC downloads of Mozart, which I'm not sure will appeal to the kind of MP3-ripping, iPod-owning consumer that the High-Resolution Audio banner is trying to entice.

Good ol' Blu-ray

HRA's problem is both a lack of content and a lack of uniformity. This is the complete opposite of Blu-ray – the good, old-fashioned disc-based format of choice for every home cinema fan.

Compared to audiophiles we have it easy, and I hope it stays that way. A new, go-fasterstriped Blu-ray standard offering 4K capability is an absolute necessity as far as I'm concerned, and I'll fight anyone suggesting 4K downloads might be the way to go (including my colleague Richard Stevenson - see p122). Why? Because that could lead to a fractured future. One of confusing, competing formats, lonely nights spent browsing websites trying to find the actual film you want to watch, and worrying whether you have enough hard drive space to store everything. And whether your player will actually play it. Call me a stick in the mud, or a Luddite, or a technophobe, but I cherish conformity over confusion ■

Would you swap Blu-ray discs for HD downloads? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com Mark Craven no longer owns an iPod. He's not trying to make a statement about music quality, though – he just can't remember where he put it





FILM FANATIC

Anton van Beek finds himself pushed to breaking point by film distributors that are still foregoing Blu-ray releases for new movies in the UK

AT THE REQUEST of the *HCC* editor I've done my very best to make this column a little upbeat in recent issues. So a look back at the miserable state of this Summer's blockbusters (*HCC* #226) ended with me shining a positive light on some of the enjoyable films available if you're prepared to look further afield than Screen One at the local multiplex. And in the last issue I was positively effusive in my response to the BBC's superb *Sound of the Cinema* season of TV and radio programming.

For a brief moment I thought I'd entered a new era, where this column would be all optimism and happiness [that'll never happen – Ed]. But, as is the way of the world, all good things must come to an end. And all it took to tip me over the edge was an announcement from Sony Pictures Home Entertainment about the UK release of Richard Linklater's Before Midnight.

Having been a huge fan of the two earlier films in Linklater's romantic trilogy (*Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*), I was excited about the prospect of savouring this latest instalment on my AV setup. That was until I discovered that the UK branch of Sony Pictures had decided to forgo a Blu-ray release for 'one of the most critically acclaimed and celebrated movies of the year' (and those are their words, not mine) and stick it out on DVD only.

I didn't spend my hard-earned cash on a full-fat home cinema setup in order to watch upscaled standard-def versions of modern movies replete with inherent artefacting and aliasing issues. Indeed, outside of archival TV material (such as the BBC's classic Doctor Who releases), I can't even remember the

Unsurprisingly, despite requests through official channels, nobody from Sony Pictures has been

willing to comment on how or why this particular decision was made. It certainly wasn't due to the material not being available, as the same studio released the film on Blu-ray in the US a week prior to its UK DVD debut.

Mind-boggling

Of course, Sony Pictures isn't alone in going down this path. Recently both Koch Media and Metrodome Distribution have left me frustrated by their decisions to bypass Blu-ray, for the UK home entertainment releases of the horror anthology *V/H/S/2* and Brian De Palma's latest film *Passion* respectively.

Despite the title, V/H/S/2 (I preferred the original title S-V/H/S) is actually one of the better-looking examples of the 'found footage' genre and – while it's no demo disc – the US Blu-ray release clearly represents a significant step up in quality. The fact that the UK DVD is also completely devoid of extras doesn't help its case either.

Meanwhile, Metrodome's decision to relegate De Palma's *Passion* to DVD, at the same time that another independent UK distributor (Arrow Video) is working its way through the same filmmaker's early catalogue, investing in new Blu-ray restorations and sourcing plenty of extra features to accompany each film, is just mind-boggling.

The likes of Eureka, Arrow and StudioCanal have clearly demonstrated that there is a viable market for all manner of films on Blu-ray in the UK. And while I admit that not every independent label may be able to take the financial risk, for a Hollywood giant such as Sony Pictures to still ignore the format on certain titles is unacceptable ■

Do you still buy films on DVD or are you a Blu-ray purist? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com Anton van Beek is currently beavering away on his own found footage horror movie, to be called either Video CD or 32GB SD Card



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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

Having recently upgraded to a 3DTV and 3D Blu-ray player, it's become very apparent that my receiver (Sony STR-DA2400ES) cannot pass a 3D signal. Even when I plug my PS3 Slim into the receiver with a 3D movie, I just get a black screen, which surprised me as the PS3 will output 3D over HDMI v1.3 at the expense of lossless HD audio (I'd already connected the PS3 direct to the TV and it detected a 3D-ready screen). So, I'm considering upgrading the receiver to one with full 3D support.

You can get a lot for £500 these days, so that's where I started looking. One of my requirements though is that I need multichannel inputs from my media centre for HD FLAC

audio. For quite a few years. every receiver had multichannel inputs, but now they're rarer than a hen's tooth. What is the current trend with dropping multichannel inputs? I can understand old analogue video inputs (composite or even component), but multichannel outputs are still common on many Blu-ray players. Most receivers will have six or more HDMI inputs, when, commonly, nobody will use more than three or four. Struggle as I might, it only seems that the really high-end receivers have multichannel inputs now, but they are out of my price bracket.

It's not as though there isn't enough space on the back of many receivers these days. They actually look quite empty compared to ones of a few years ago! Tony Barrett, via email

Richard Stevenson replies: You are certainly right about a reduction in connections on AVRs these days. We have gone from three video connection formats (composite, component and S-Video) to just one, HDMI, and many audio devices connect with AVRs via HDMI or a single network connection supporting multiple devices. There simply is not the requirement for AVR rear panels to look so jam-packed any more. Multichannel input is an interesting omission at the low end of the AVR market because it is relatively cheap for a manufacturer to implement.

Most AVRs have a number of analogue stereo inputs and a bypass function that allows the signal to skip A to D conversion and being messed about with in the DSP chip. For those that do run A to D for analogue signals, multichannel analogue inputs would mean a few more ADC circuits, but even that would add very little to the overall price. I believe the omission of analogue multichannel inputs is simply a matter of customer demand, or lack thereof. There are very few new source devices that output multichannel audio in analogueonly, as most will also offer HDMI and possibly network connection, which are arguably superior and certainly more convenient for a pure digital

★ Star letter...

Movie soundtracks are great – go and hear them live!

Anton van Beek asks us what our favourite film scores are and why (Film Fanatic, HCC #227). Personally, that's quite difficult to answer, considering the almost 600 film soundtrack CDs I have as a fan of orchestral scores. Of course, this music is written to sit alongside the images, but for me it can go perfect without the pictures, too. It is just great to relax listening to soundtracks. Something romantic, something dramatic, something from an action movie – there is always a score that soothes the mood I'm in. Lights out, in my home cinema setup with the few surround discs I have – or otherwise CDs - in seven-channel stereo mode on my AV receiver. Perfect.

And what I can recommend to everyone is to go to a film music concert. To hear and see the music played live is just wonderful. I'm lucky that in Belgium we have the World Soundtrack Awards concert each year.

And for the people who still want the movie with the music there are a lot of screenings accompanied by a live soundtrack. In May 2014 at the Royal Albert Hall in

London there are screenings of *Gladiator*, *Star Trek* and *Star Trek Into Darkness* accompanied by an orchestra. That is the most spectacular way to enjoy a movie – even better than seeing it in a theatre or a home cinema. *Patrick Peeters, via email*

Mark Craven replies: Thanks for the recommendation, Patrick. The Royal Albert Hall concert screenings certainly look very appealing. Those interested

should log on to www. royalalberthall.com for ticket details. There's also the Film Music Gala 2014 in June – Indiana Jones! Rocky! Jurassic Park!

Six hundred soundtrack CDs sounds like a lot. I'm not sure I can think of more than about 20 that I would like to listen to again without seeing the movie, a mixture of obvious ones (Superman, The Godfather, Back to the Future) and a few personal favourites that might not make it onto someone else's list (Predator, Midnight Run, Southern Comfort). In fact, personally I'm a little underwhelmed by most modern movie scores. In the last decade (possibly even two decades) there are few that standout. Saw, Braveheart, Tron and the Lord of the Rings trilogy are the only ones I can really remember — the rest is all a bit of a blur! Of course, over the

same period Hollywood has rewritten the rulebook concering surround sound, so I'm not really complaining.

Star letter-writer Patrick wins a copy of the hit action-comedy **RED 2** on Blu-ray, courtesy of EntertainmentOne. Starring Bruce Willis, John Malkovich and Helen Mirren, it's available to buy on BD and DVD from November 25.



source. I would have guessed that most of your FLAC files on the media centre will be stereo, so will connect to all AVRs via two phono cables or coaxial/optical digital, but for multichannel audio it may be time for a media centre upgrade to one with an HDMI output.

Confused by UHD

Hi, I'm extremely excited about Ultra HD but a little confused so you might be able to help.

Am I right to say UHD is delivered via HDMI 2.0? If so, do UHD TVs have 2.0 boards installed? If not does this mean a reduction in the frame rate, or in fact, will UHD Blu-ray players have 2.0 boards and will HDMI leads which have reached v1.4 for 3D be able to carry the bandwith needed?

I don't want to feel (when I splash out on my new TV) that I'm not getting what I pay for.

You convinced me to stick with 3D so work your magic again! Peter Brennan, via email

Mark Craven replies: Firstly, Ultra HD definition video at 3,840 x 2,160 resolution can be delivered via the previous HDMI v1.4 standard (which explains, partly, why Ultra HD TVs and projectors were launched before the new HDMI 2.0 standard) but only up to a maximum of 30 frames-persecond. HDMI 2.0 allows for 3,840 x 2,160 video content to be shunted down the pipe at speeds up to 60fps, amongst other benefits (more audio channels, etc) from the increased bandwith. This could be important when it comes to Ultra HD broadcast TV, not that any UK platforms are particularly imminent - you're probably looking at 2015 at least.

As for a new Blu-ray specification, nothing – at the time of writing – has been announced, although we wouldn't be surprised if there was some major news at CES 2014 in January. HDMI 2.0 will undoubtedly be built into any next-gen BD hardware, but as the vast majority of film content is filmed at 24fps, future UHD Blu-ray titles are likely to feed just fine into v1.4 UHD TVs.

Another thing to consider is that the manufacturers of these first-gen UHD TVs that sport v1.4

HDMI inputs (Sony, Samsung, LG, Toshiba, Philips) are all promising an upgrade path to HDMI 2.0, either by an external box or, in Sony's case, a possible firmware update (although that brand's debut Ultra HD projector, the VPL-VW1000ES, and KD-84X9000584in UHD TV will require an external upgrade). This isn't an ideal situation, but does mean that if you purchase a UHD TV now it will not be obsolete in a couple of years. And, no, you won't need to buy a new HDMI cable - any High Speed cable will do.

Curved TVs are stupid (again)

I completely agree with Ion Mitchell (*Feedback*, *HCC* #227) about the idea of curved TVs. As he says these are a solution looking for a problem.

I can't see any practical reason for a curved TV at all. The manufacturers say it leads to a more immersive picture quality, but they surely must know that this isn't true, unless you were to put your face right up to the screen. It's obvious to me that these curved TVs are just a marketing exercise and the

CONTACT US...

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Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

companies are hoping to sell them to people who are easily impressed. And at the price they are, I'd rather have a projector and screen any day. Lawrence, via email

Mark Craven replies: So that's another one for the anti-curved OLED camp, then. We're sure there are more of you!

What is strange about the screen launches from Samsung and LG is that they seem to have skipped flat OLED technology altogether. Personally, a regular 55in OLED TV would be something of interest to me, yet Samsung isn't selling one and LG's is in very limited supply. Is the technology over before it's even begun? ■

Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance



The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2

This insanely imaginative sequel to the 1974 horror classic is getting the deluxe Blu-ray treatment from November 11, when Arrow Video unleashes

its new three-disc limited edition. Packed with extras, it's a must-have for all horror fans, and we have three copies up for grabs!

Question:

Who is the director of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2?*

Answer:

A) Tobe Hooper B) John Carpenter

C) Wes Craven

Email your answer with **'Chainsaw'** as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



JFK

Released to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the assassination of American President John F. Kennedy, Oliver Stone's criticallyacclaimed thriller *JFK* is now available on Blu-ray

and Digital HD. And thanks to our good friends at 20th Century Fox we've got our hands on five copies of the *JFK* Blu-ray to pop in the post to lucky readers.

Ouestion:

Oliver Stone wrote and directed a film about which of the following classic bands?

Answer:

A) Nickelback B) Dave Matthews Band

C) The Doors

Email your answer with 'JFK' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Only God Forgives

Controversial filmmaker Nicolas Winding Refn reunites with actor Ryan Gosling for the violent crime thriller **Only God Forgives**. This twisted tale of revenge is being

released on DVD and Blu-ray by Lionsgate Home Entertainment and Icon Films on December 2, and to celebrate we have five copies of the Blu-ray to give away.

Ouestion:

Ryan Gosling starred in which of Nicolas Winding Refn's previous films?

Answer:

A) Drive B) Valhalla Rising

C) Bronson

Email your answer with **'God'** as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

A ViewSonic Full HD projector and The Wolverine on 3D Blu-ray!

Enjoy your superhero thrills on the state-of-the-art PJD7820HD home cinema projector

A DEDICATED PROJECTOR is the dream of every home cinema enthusiast. and thanks to our friends at ViewSonic. you could be living that dream! The home entertainment specialist has given us a Full HD 3D projector to give away to one lucky reader, plus a set of 3D glasses and a copy of The Wolverine on 3D Blu-ray.

The PJD7820HD is the latest DLP-based home cinema light-canon from ViewSonic, offering crisp, bigscreen images at 1,920 x 1,080 resolution. With 3,000 Lumens on offer, it promises a clear, bright image even in well-lit rooms, making it ideal for watching sports or playing your games console as well as settling down for movie night. A 15,000:1 contrast ratio ensures deep cinematic black levels and dazzling peak whites, while BrilliantColour technology delivers vibrant, punchy tones.

Setting up the PJD7820HD is supremely easy courtesy of HDMI connectivity, auto source detection and preset picture modes, and to ensure very low running costs the projector provides up to 8,000 hours lamp-life, filter-free technology and comes with a three-year warranty.

The PJD7820HD is also able to accept 3D content - just put on the PGD-250 3D glasses and you're ready to be immersed! With this in mind our competition prize is



bundled with The Wolverine on 3D Blu-ray, the latest instalment in the action-packed *X-Men* franchise starring Hugh Jackman as the adamantium-clawed hero. The Wolverine is available to buy on Blu-ray™, DVD and DIGITAL HD from November 18.

To be in with a chance of winning these prizes, simply answer the brainteaser below. And good luck!

Ouestion:

The Wolverine star Hugh Jackman also appeared in which of the following?

Answer:

A) Van Helsing B) The Mummy C) Dracula

Email your answer, plus your name and address, to: Competitions@homecinemachoice.com and with 'ViewSonic' as the subject heading.

For more info on the ViewSonic PJD7820HD, head over to

www.viewsoniceurope.com/wolverine3d



Terms & Conditions

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FRANCHISE

Doctor Who

HCC joins the celebrations as Britain's best-loved time traveller turns 50...



SOMETHING OF A rarity in the world of TV sci-fi, Doctor Who has never really found itself being relegated to the 'Cult TV' niche. Instead, it continues to play a major role in popular culture in the UK while simultaneously taking on soap operas and talent shows in the ratings war.

But what is it about this particular show that makes it so successful and – with the 50th anniversary coming up – has given it such impressive longevity? The answer is simple: adaptability. Not only does the

central tenet of having 'adventures in time and space' open up infinite story possibilities, but the added concept of regeneration means that the Doctor himself is able to change with the times – and we can seamlessly switch from Matt Smith to Peter Capaldi.

It also doesn't hurt that over the decades - despite original producer Sydney Newman's desire for the series to avoid 'bug-eyed monsters' – Doctor Who has introduced viewers to a universe packed with some of the most memorable monsters to ever haunt

a TV screen. The likes of the Zygons, Daleks, Wirrn, Weeping Angels and Cybermen are have all been genuinely scary.

Lastly, Doctor Who has also adapted

The Cybermen have been





well to the introduction of DVD and Blu-ray. While the hi-def format gets the best out of the newer episodes, the real plaudits have to go to the treatment of the vintage episodes on DVD. Thanks to the dedication of the Doctor Who Restoration Team, each of the 139 'classic' serials released to date has been meticulously restored and comes with an encyclopedic array of bonus features, lifting the *Doctor Who* DVD range above all other TV releases and most feature films as well. Roll on the next 50 years

PICK OF THE BEST...

Genesis of the Daleks
For people of a certain age Tom Baker remains the definitive Doctor. And while his tenure resulted in many wonderful adventures, the exploration of the morality of time travel that arises out of this superb six-part story (exploring the origin of the show's best-loved monsters) represents allegorical sci-fi at its very best.

Blink
Before he became the programme's current showrunner, Steven Moffat wowed fans with his script for this chilling 'Doctor-lite' 2007 episode that introduced viewers to the terrifying Weeping Angels. After watching this, you'll never look at a statue in the same way again...

The Caves of Androzani
Writer Robert Holmes and director
Graeme Harper (both among the best
the show ever had) conspired to give
Peter Davison's Fifth Doctor the perfect
swan song in this gripping regeneration story.
Outside of a rather dodgy 'Magma Beast' this
four-parter just doesn't put a foot wrong.

AND THE WORST...

The Trial of a Time Lord

After an 18-month hiatus from our screens, Colin Baker's Sixth Doctor returned in a make-or-break 14-episode run that saw him being put on trial by his own people (much as the show itself was by the bosses at the BBC). Sadly, despite the promise of its flashy opening VFX shot, the series was largely a dud and Baker was unceremoniously given the boot.

COLLECTIBLES

No self-respecting Whovian can afford to miss out on these...

Doctor Who: Series 7 Soundtrack



Murray Gold has been composing the music for *Doctor Who* since its return in 2005 – and the 74 tracks on Silva Screen's latest CD find him at the top of his game.

Official Dalek Replica



The BBC Shop currently offers a quartet of life-size Dalek replicas priced between £2,995 and £3,695. Each is hand-built to order and uses the original moulds created for

the TV series. Exterminate! Exterminate!

50th Anniversary Sonic Screwdriver Universal Remote



The Wand Company celebrated the show's 50th anniversary with this deluxe gold and silver edition of its Eleventh Doctor's Sonic Screwdriver universal remote, limited to just 250 worldwide.

The Light at the End (Vinyl Edition)



As well as featuring five previous incarnations of the Doctor, this audio drama is also getting a four-disc 180g vinyl release. Limited to just 500 copies, the

£100 deluxe set also includes a 40-minute doc.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION...

Kick-start your *Doctor Who* DVD and Blu-ray library with these must-own boxsets

The Beginning [An Unearthly Child/The Daleks/The Edge of Destruction] (R2 DVD)
Lost in Time [18 'orphaned'

Lost in Time [18 'orphaned' episodes from incomplete stories] (R2 DVD)

Davros Collection: Limited Edition [Genesis of the Daleks /Destiny of the Daleks/ Resurrection of the Daleks/ Revelation of the Daleks/ Remembrance of the Daleks: Special Edition] (R2 DVD)

Beneath the Surface [Doctor Who and the Silurians/The Sea Devils/Warriors of the Deep] (R2 DVD)



The Key to Time [The Ribos Operation/The Pirate Planet/ The Stones of Blood/The Androids of Tara/The Power of Kroll/The Armageddon Factor] (R2 DVD)

Revisitations 1 [The Talons of Weng-Chiang/The Caves of

Androzani/The TV Movie] (R2 DVD)

Revisitations 2 [The Seeds of Death/Carnival of Monsters/
Resurrection of the Daleks]
(R2 DVD)

Revisitations 3 [The Tomb of the Cybermen/The Three Doctors/The Robots of Death] (R2 DVD)

Doctor Who: Limited Edition Collector's Set [Dr. Who & The Daleks/Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150 A.D.] (Region B BD)

Doctor Who: The Complete Series 1-7 Including the Specials (All-region BD)







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PLAYBACK

→ SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS WORLD WAR Z Brad Pitt battles the undead in this extended action extravaganza THIS IS THE END Post-apocalyptic comedy hits BD THE WICKER MAN The ultimate cult classic is reborn in hi-def CURSE OF CHUCKY The pint-sized psychopath goes back to basics BEYOND: TWO SOULS Has the interactive movie finally come of age? AND MUCH MORE!





Globetrotting with the undead

Is this \$200million zombie blockbuster the ultimate disaster movie or just a disaster of a movie?





HCC VERDICT

World War Z: Extended Action Cut

→ Paramount → All-region BD

→ £.25 Approx

WE SAY: Powerful 7.1 sonics and
striking hi-def visuals give this zombie
blockbuster added bite on Blu-ray



→ WORLD WAR Z

Based on Max Brooks' best-selling novel of the same name, this epic action horror stars Brad Pitt as a former United Nations investigator tasked with travelling the globe in an attempt to find a cure for a zombie outbreak sweeping the planet.

Trapped in development hell for years, only to finally go into production and then be subjected to last minute rewrites that resulted in the entire final act being reshot, it's something of a miracle that this \$200million zombiethon isn't a complete disaster. It's not a rousing success either.

The global approach to the undead pandemic gives World War Z an epic feel, but also makes it seem slightly disjointed and episodic. Additionally, while the major set-pieces have plenty of impact, the decision to play down the actual violence renders the zombies themselves a little toothless when compared to what even a TV series, such as The Walking Dead, currently offers.

But if you're more interested in action than scares and like a spot of globetrotting adventure in your movies, then *World War Z* is a perfectly enjoyable way to spend a couple of hours.

Picture: World War Z's AVC-encoded 2.40:11080p imagery won't necessarily win any awards as home cinema demo material, but that doesn't stop it from doing a fine job of replicating the film's deliberately flat and drab aesthetic.

For the most part the colour palette is fairly subdued, which only serves to make the sudden

intrusion of primary tones (such as the red lighting that bathes the stairwell in the lead-up to the rooftop helicopter rescue in Chapter 4) that much more jarring.

Detailing remains impressive throughout, however. Clothing and faces are particularly well rendered, with every intricate crease and wrinkle being cleanly delineated without the need to resort to digital sharpening tools.

Audio: Paramount's DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 mix is every bit as apocalyptic as you could wish for — the giant scale of the film's major action scenes are matched blow-for-blow by the remarkable breadth, depth and power of the disc's sonics. In other words, it's the kind of bombastic track that will have you ducking for cover as an exploding helicopter sends shrapnel flying across the entire soundstage in Chapter 9, or grabbing on to the arms of your chair as a gaping hole in the side of a passenger jet whips wind around you in Chapter 11. Pure home cinema gold, in other words.

Extras: The film's tumultuous production history, and the fact that a different third act was shot and screened to test audiences, is common knowledge, so the rather innocuous array of extras actually on offer is extremely disappointing.

Origins (eight minutes) looks at the genesis of the film. Looking to Science (seven minutes) covers the attempts to ground the film in the science of actual viral outbreaks. Finally, WWZ: Production (36 minutes) is split into four parts, each looking at the making of a specific scene. Meh.

Epic 3D

20th Century Fox → Region A/B BD £28 Approx



This bland animation from the team behind the Ice Age films is unlikely to have the same kind of longevity

as that series. While it might win over kids, older viewers are unlikely to take anything away from this Blu-ray release outside of the suitably epic MVC 2.40:1 stereoscopic encode, which offers impressive dimensionality and vibrant colours. The DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix is rather boisterous, and makes full use of the soundstage. Most of the extras (all relegated to the set's 2D platter) are clearly aimed at younger viewers and take an educational approach to some of the film's concerns.



Much Ado About Nothing

Kaleidoscape → All-region BD £20 Approx



The phrase 'love makes you do the wacky' may stem from Buffy the Vampire Slayer, but it applies equally to

Shakespeare's romantic comedy. As such, it's hardly surprising to learn that Buffy... creator Joss Whedon's modern update of Much Ado... gets to the emotional heart of the story and is also very witty. The stylish black-and-white visuals cut an impressive figure on this disc's AVC 1.85:11080p encode, although the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix favours dialogue over surround effects. The sole extra of note is an informative and fun chat-track by Whedon.



The Stone Roses: Made of Stone

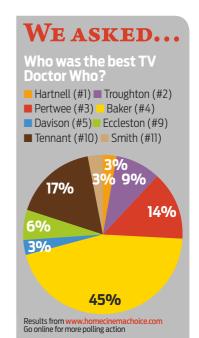
4DVD → All-region BD £25 Approx



The wealth of rehearsal and gig footage makes Shane Meadows film about The Stone Roses' recent reunion tour

a must-see for fans of the Manchester quartet. Given the mix of source material the AVC 1.78:11080i imagery isn't particularly exciting, but the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio really brings the band's music to life – especially during the concert footage. 4DVD's two-disc set also houses a fine set of extras, including a commentary from the filmmakers and five additional live performances (also in DTS-HD MA 5.1).







Post-apocalyptic party people

It's the end of the world as we know it and we feel fine thanks to this sumptuous disc

→ This is the End

Actors Seth Rogen, James Franco, Jay Baruchel, Jonah Hill, Danny McBride and Craig Robinson find themselves trapped together when a party they're attending is interrupted by the end of the world. And as supplies start running low, their friendship is pushed to the limits by in-fighting, demonic possession and an irate Emma Watson...

Ignore the familiar second act bloat that blights so many modern comedies (although this one fares better than most with a relatively modest 104minute running time), and revel in the gags - This Is The End is an absolute hoot. The cast deserves particular credit for being willing to indulge in such grotesque self-parody – and not just the main players either, with the likes of Michael Cera and Channing Tatum also happy to subvert their image in cameos. Picture: This Is The End arrives on Blu-ray with a great-looking AVC 2.40:11080p picture that packs masses of pixel polish into every shot, while skin tones appear natural and vibrant reds and orange flames dominate the apocalyptic panoramas that bookend the bulk of the action. If there's any obvious flaw it's that blacks are sometimes prone to crush, which robs the image of some shadow detail.

Intriguingly, the rear of the Blu-ray sleeve indicates that This Is The End has been 'Mastered in 4K'. However, it obviously doesn't fit into Sony's official 'Mastered in 4K' range due to the fact that so much disc space has been given over to bonus features. Audio: With large portions of the film devoted to nothing more than people standing around shouting at one another, This Is The End doesn't necessarily



feature the most exciting DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix you'll

However, in those scenes where things do get a little more chaotic (such as the mayhem as the apocalypse begins in Chapter 3 or the monster chase in Chapter 12) the soundtrack steps up admirably with plenty of dynamic surround effects and subwoofer-bothering bass. **Extras:** Fans of the movie will love the bonus

features that are on offer here. These include a commentary from the filmmakers, five behind-thescenes featurettes (including a look at the making of the hilarious Pineapple Express 2 home movie), Rogen and Baruchel's original 2007 short that inspired the film, alternate line readings, a gag reel, eight deleted scenes and a host of marketing goodies including cast confessionals and the red band 'sizzle' trailer. Overall it's a fine selection that puts other disc releases to shame.





HCC VERDICT

This Is The End → Sony Pictures → All-region BD **WE SAY:** Apocalyptic action ensures that this cracking comedy has some surprisingly strong hi-def chops





Our prayers have been answered by StudioCanal's deluxe release of this British horror classic





HCC Verdict

The Wicker Man: The Final Cut ⇒ StudioCanal ⇒ Region B BD WE SAY: It's hard to imagine anybody could put together a better hi-def package for this cult horror



→ THE WICKER MAN

In many ways it's fitting that Robin Hardy and Anthony Schaffer's film about death and rebirth should itself have been reborn so many times.

This Blu-ray release collects no less than three different edits of their tale of a pious detective (Edward Woodward) lured to a remote island on the pretence of finding a missing girl, only to discover that he has a much greater - and more terrifying - role to play in the inhabitants' pagan rituals. And no matter which version you prefer, The Wicker Man remains one of the most distinctive and disturbing films ever produced in the UK. Picture: Disc One hosts The Wicker Man: The Final Cut, a 93-minute re-edit that makes use of a recently discovered 35mm release print that Robin Hardy put together to show US distributor

Abraxas. While there's nothing here that most fans won't have seen before (and some scenes from the 'Director's Cut' are missing), the restored footage is of a higher quality that ever previously thought possible. The AVC 1.85:11080p encode does still noticeably lurch between beautifully detailed restored imagery and considerably softer

Disc Two hosts both the original 88-minute UK

'Theatrical Cut' and the 100-minute 'Director's Cut'. The former's AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode holds up very well in comparison to the best of ... The Final Cut, while the latter is only presented as an anamorphic 1.85:1 standard-definition transfer.

Audio: All three versions of *The Wicker Man* feature LPCM dual-mono soundtracks and they're about as good as you could ever hope the movie to sound. The crackpot dialogue is cleanly rendered, the musical numbers have a very natural range and there's no trace of any background distortion or other technical issues.

Extras: The majority of the extras join ... The Final Cut on Disc One and represent a mix of old and new material. The former includes the documentary *Burnt* Offering: The Cult of The Wicker Man, a US interview with Christopher Lee and Robin Hardy from 1979 and an archival trailer.

> The new material on this platter takes the form of a restoration comparison, a new interview with Robin Hardy, a trailer for ... The Final Cut and two featurettes Worshipping The Wicker Man (23 minutes) and The Music of The Wicker Man (15 minutes). Extras on Disc Two are an audio

commentary for the 'Director's Cut' recorded for the 2006 DVD release and video footage from the commentary recording. This Blu-ray release also includes the film's CD soundtrack,

which wasn't made available for review.

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ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

Beyond: Two Souls

Sony Computer Entertainment Europe → PS3 → £50 Approx



With Hollywood heavyweights Willem Dafoe and Ellen Page amongst the cast list, preview screenings of footage at the Tribeca Film Festival and a script rumoured to be 2,000 pages long, Beyond: Two Souls doesn't want to be thought of as a mere console

game. Indeed, developer Quantic Dream (which made the similarly operatic *Heavy Rain*) describes it as a 'psychological action thriller.'

Delusions of grandeur? Not entirely. The quality acting, lush photo-realistic graphics and cinematic feel – it's even presented

in a 2.35:1 frame – certainly make it an enjoyably unique experience, on the surface at least. However, the constrained nature of the gameplay, as you take control of both protagonist Jodie Holmes and her 'tethered' ghostly chum Aiden – in a non-linear tale of supernatural nonsense and CIA shenanigans (think Stephen King's *Firestarter*, basically) – is a far cry from the open-world adventures that appeal to so many gamers. *Beyond: Two Souls* is very much cerebral, with even the fighting elements feeling a little lacklustre. The result is that it's not the sort of game you'll fire up for a short, adrenaline-fuelled session, and some may find the pacing a turn off. An interesting concept overall, but there are actual movies that provide psychological action thrills with more aplomb.



FI 2013

Namco Bandai -> Xbox 360/PS3/PC -> £45 Approx



Benjamin Franklin once wrote that 'in this world, nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes'. While that may have been true back in 1789, here in the 21st century we have another certainty – the fact that every single successful sports game has a yearly update in the run up to Christmas.

The problem with this approach is that the sports themselves don't tend to change that much on a year-to-year basis. Even in F1 racing, one of the few sports to actually indulge itself in the odd dramatic rule change (such 2011's introduction of DRS technology), this

still doesn't happen every single year. As such, the differences between one instalment and the next tend to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

F1 2013 suffers more than most in this regard. Developer Codemasters cracked the driving model a few years ago and – despite a few tweaks and updates – there's nothing to this side of things that fans won't already be familiar with. It looks absolutely sublime, but that was also true of last year's iteration. The one major addition is the 'Classics' mode, featuring cars, drivers and circuits from the '80s and '90s (although what die-hard F1 fans will make of its curious car and driver pairings is another matter). Don't get us wrong, F1 2013 is still a damn good racing sim but – all things considered – it's not all that different to F1 2012.



Homeland: The Complete Second Season

20th Century Fox → Region A/B BD £40 Approx



Despite a couple of missteps along the way (mainly anything involving Brody's petulant daughter Dana), this second season of the hit TV thriller is every bit as gripping as the first.

This latest three-disc Blu-ray release also holds its own with last year's release with extremely strong digital-to-digital AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes and lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks. Also spread across the discs are four deleted scenes, two *Making of...* featurettes, a video diary and a prologue to the third season.



American Horror Story: Asylum

20th Century Fox → All-region BD £40 Approx



What do alien abductions, medical experiments, demonic possession and a psycho Santa have in common? They all feature in this bonkers second season of the cult horror series

as it relates the twisted tale of the Briarcliff Mental Institution. Visually, this story is heavily stylised with blooming contrast and desaturated colours present throughout, not that this affects the technical quality of Fox's AVC 1.78:11080p encodes. This three-disc Blu-ray set also boasts suitably raucous DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks and a modest selection of bonus features.



Streets of Fire

Second Sight → Region B BD £20 Approx



With its odd mix of 1950s bike gangs and 1980s synth-rock, Walter Hill's 'Rock and Roll Fable' is a true guilty pleasure. And if you've yet to sample its cheesy charm, we can't think of

a better way than with this superb Blu-ray platter. The AVC 1.85:1 1080p imagery is as gaudy and grainy as any aficionado could hope for, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 and LPCM stereo soundtracks both work wonders for the fabulous score. Pick of a great batch of extras is a brand-new 79-min retrospective documentary.



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Dinosaurs, Daleks and soufflés?

Nothing is off limits as we say goodbye to two old companions and hello to an 'impossible girl'

→ Doctor Who: The Complete Seventh Series

The good, the bad and the ugly are all on display in these 15 episodes from the BBC's sci-fi smash – and we're not just talking about the freaky aliens the Doctor regularly encounters.

The episodes themselves serve to highlight the highs and lows of this incarnation — but the good news is that for every *The Doctor, the Widow and the Wardrobe* or *Journey to the Centre of the TARDIS*, we have likes of *The Snowmen*, *Asylum of the Daleks*, *The Angels Take Manhattan* (sob) and *The Crimson Horror* to more than make amends. And then there's *The Name of the Doctor*; a brilliant love letter to the show's history, capped with the most thrilling cliffhanger imaginable.

Picture: Colour reproduction impresses across the AVC 1.78:1 1080i encodes, particularly when it comes to the ease with which they handle the bright primaries that regularly dominate the show's photography. The sharp hi-def visuals also help showcase the increasingly brilliant costume and makeup effects

That said, it's not quite perfect. As with the previous series there are still a few minor issues with regards to aliasing and banding. Not to mention the occasional less-than-black black level caused by the heightened contrast.

Audio: It's been a while coming, but *Doctor Who*'s 5.1 mixes finally make the leap from DTS-HD HR to DTS-HD MA with this latest boxset.

Surround separation is appreciable across all of the episodes, finding plenty to keep the rear speakers engaged. At the same time the LFE channel proves to be particularly bold and powerful. Not only does this make the onscreen action more immersive and impactful, it also works

wonders with Murray Gold's expansive scores. *Extras:* Don't expect too much in the way of behind-the-scenes material with this set. While almost all of the episodes get dedicated minifeaturettes, they tend to focus on just one single aspect of the production.

More useful in this regard are the set's four audio commentaries. Production designer Michael Pickwoad teams up with art director Paul Spriggs for a chat about the making of *The Snowmen*. Writer Mark Gatiss, visual effects supervisor Murray Barber and visual effects producer Jenna Powell give their thoughts on *Cold War*. Matt Smith provides his first commentary for the series as he joins director Jamie Payne to discuss *Hide*. Finally, actors Catrin Stewart, Neve McIntosh and Dan Starky are on hand to chat about the fun they had making *The Crimson Horror*.

Spread throughout the set are a host of short episode prequels and short sketches, plus the five-part *Pond Life* web series. Also included is a video following the cast at Comic Con 2012 and three BBC America documentaries looking at the science behind the show, the Doctor's companions (at least those since the show's return) and the episodes that have been set and/or shot in the US.



The Ice Warriors are the latest vintage Who monsters to be given a makeover

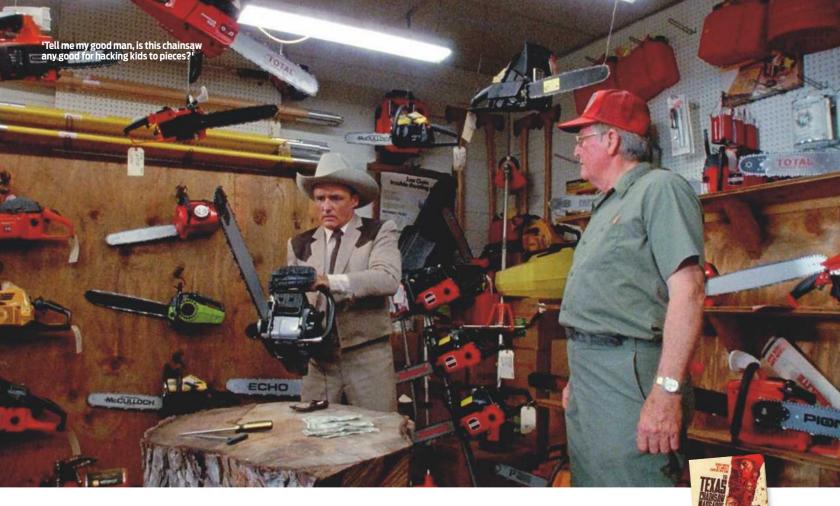


HCC Verdict

Doctor Who: The Complete Seventh Series

→ BBC Worldwide → All-region BD → £50 Approx **WE SAY:** The ideal way to kick off the show's 50th anniversary celebrations





An HD sight for (chain)saw eyes

Tobe Hooper's horror sequel cuts through the competition with this feature-packed release





HCC VERDICT

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2

→ Arrow Video → Region B (Disc One)/

All-region BD (Disc Two)/

RO DVD (Disc Three) → £30 Approx

WE SAY: A sensational Blu-ray

package loaded with great extras



→ THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE 2

If Tobe Hooper's 1974 horror classic *The Texas Chain* Saw Massacre was a response to the concerns about American identity following Watergate and Vietnam, his 1986 seguel is imbued with the notion of excess that defined the decade in which it was made. The big budget Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2 is bigger than the original in every imaginable way. It's got more action, (much) more gore and more gags. A deliriously sick and funny film that has actually improved with age, with Dennis Hopper brilliant as the vengeful lawman hunting Leatherface et al. **Picture:** Having first got to know The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2 courtesy of a bootleg VHS back in the 1990s, it's almost impossible to believe that the film could ever look as good as it does on Arrow's deluxe Blu-ray release.

Transferred from a 35mm interpositive and restored in the US, with additional restoration work undertaken in the UK by Arrow, it's entirely likely that Hooper's sequel hasn't looked this good since the original negatives were struck. Colour reproduction is one of the biggest strengths of the film's AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode, undoubtedly down to the fact that director of photography Richard Kooris supervised the colour correction process during the initial HD transfer.

Outside of the leering close-ups of Grandpa's face in Chapter 11, detailing is perhaps not quite as finessed as you might expect. But given the

authentically coarse, grainy nature of the material, this is understandable.

Audio: The film arrives on Blu-ray with a surprisingly intense and effective LPCM 2.0 stereo soundtrack. Separation across the front soundstage is perfectly acceptable and the dynamic range is expansive enough to cope with everything from the rumbling engine of a chainsaw to Caroline Williams' earsplitting screams with no trace of distortion at either end of the scale. Dialogue and music reproduction are also first-rate.

Extras: Accompanying the film itself on the first Blu-ray platter are the pair of commentaries (one with the director, the other featuring actors Bill Mosely, Caroline Williams and special effects legend Tom Savini), 88-minute It Runs in the Family retrospective documentary, alternate opening sequence, four deleted scenes and trailer that first appeared on the 2006 US DVD release. To this Arrow has added a half-hour discussion of the film by Nightmare USA author Stephen Thrower, a 14-minute interview with stunt performer Bob Elmore and a gallery of 85 behind-the-scenes photos.

Bundled with this is a second Blu-ray platter titled *Tobe Hooper's Early Works* (and a DVD that replicates the same content). This contains HD presentations of Hooper's 1964 short *The Heisters* and his weird 1969 feature debut *Eggshells* (restored from the only existing copy – a faded 35mm show print). The disc also includes a director's commentary on *Eggshells*, a new 24-minute interview with Hooper and a reel of trailers for 13 of his films.

The Witches

StudioCanal → Region B BD/R2 DVD £25 Approx



Early this year rumours started floating around that StudioCanal would not be releasing any more Hammer films

on Blu-ray. Not only does this disc put pay to those rumours, it also represents the company's best HD presentation of a Hammer film yet. The AVC 1.66:11080p restoration is breathtaking and the LPCM mono audio is crystal clear. Not bad for a such a minor (but not uninteresting) entry in the pantheon of Hammer horrors. Also on the disc is the 42-minute Hammer Glamour doc, featuring interviews with Valerie Leon, Caroline Munro, Martine Beswick and Madeline Smith.



The Mummy

Icon Films → Region B BD/R2 DVD £25 Approx



Following the success of Curse of Frankenstein and Dracula, Hammer tried its hand at reinventing another

Universal horror icon with 1959's The Mummy. The film doesn't quite measure up to its predecessors, but is still a terrific romp with plenty to enjoy – not least Christopher Lee's performance as the bandaged baddy. The Blu-ray disc offers a choice of 1.66:1 and 1.37:1 versions, both of which look great courtesy of the restored AVC 1080p visuals. Extras are numerous and include a fascinating chat-track and even a bonus movie (1955's Stolen Face), albeit in SD.



The Fury

Arrow Video → Region B BD £23 Approx



Arrow's Blu-ray release of Brian de Palma's 1978 horror The Fury (which explores similar themes to Carrie)

is one of the most impressive discs the label has released to date. Restored from the original camera negative under the watchful eye of the supremely talented James White, the AVC 1.85:11080p picture is. in a word, revelatory, with authentic colours and copious fine details. The DTS-HD 4.0 and LPCM dual-mono soundtracks also hold up surprisingly well given the source material. Interviews and a 'lossless' isolated score are among the disc's excellent array of extras.



The People Under the Stairs

Arrow Video → Region B BD £23 Approx



Most horror films bury any traces of social commentary in their subtext. The same cannot be said of *The*

People Under the Stairs. Trading gore for gags and scares for satire, Wes Craven's 1991 flick doesn't deliver much in the way of genuine terror, but it's a provocative and witty genre outing that's worth a visit. Derived from a 35mm interpositive, the Blu-ray's AVC 1.85:11080p encode looks surprisingly sharp and is ably supported by the cleanly rendered LPCM 2.0 audio. Extras include a commentary, interviews and discussion of the film's impact.





Back to basics for pint-sized psycho

Playtime is at an end as this direct-to-DVD seguel sees killer doll return to his roots

→ Curse of Chucky

Freddy Krueger. Michael Myers. Pinhead. Leatherface. Jason Voorhees. Chucky. The one thing that all of these modern horror icons have in common is that they've each managed to wrack up five (or more) sequels. But of them all, only Chucky has done so with a direct-to-video outing that not only matches the quality of the earlier films, but actually improves on many of them.

Written and directed by series creator Don Mancini, Curse of Chucky sets out to restore the pint-sized killer to his roots – and it succeeds admirably. This is the creepiest and most menacing the series has been since the first two films, playing up the suspense angle as much as it does the blood.

The fact that it also manages to pull the entire franchise together, taking it full circle with a fanpleasing post-credit scene, means that Curse of Chucky also has a slight feel of finality to it. Which would be a real shame as – based on this outing – there's clearly plenty of life left in this terror toy. Picture: This Blu-ray release boasts exactly the kind of high quality hi-def imagery you would expect from a modern movie. Opting for a darker, more shadowy style, the AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode's palette is understandably rather limited. However, blacks are rock-solid and packed with shadow detail, and the clarity and sharpness of the image ensures that close-ups (particularly those of Chucky's face) are packed with intricate textures.

Audio: Curse of Chucky's DTS-HD MA 5.1 track is full of fury, but focuses most of its attention on the front speaker array. The surrounds are largely given over to







HCC VERDICT

Curse of Chucky → Universal Pictures → All-region BD WE SAY: A solid hi-def package for this surprisingly enjoyable direct-to-DVD horror sequel





more atmospheric effects, such as driving rain and rolling thunder, which move seamlessly across the soundstage. Not bad then, but you do sometimes feel that it could have been a little more ambitious. **Extras:** Behind Universal's ugly menu design hides an enjoyable, if limited, collection of bonus features.

Playing with Dolls: The Making of Curse of Chucky (16 minutes) is a reasonable look behind the scenes. featuring plenty of input from Don Mancini and the film's cast. Living Doll: Bringing Chucky to Life (nine minutes) is, in effect, an extension of this as it looks at the techniques used to create Chucky.

Voodoo Doll: The Chucky Legacy (seven minutes), gives the director and cast the chance to talk about the franchise and pick their favourite performances and moments from the five.

Rounding it all off are a short gag reel, six deleted scenes (six minutes) and four storyboard-to-film comparisons (25 minutes).



Hunting for cinematic perfection

The reborn Arrow Academy range kicks off with one of cinema's all-time greats

→ THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

Actor Charles Laughton only once tried his hand at directing a film and its poor reception meant that he never attempted it again – probably one of the greatest tragedies in the history of film. *The Night of The Hunter* – a noirish tale of sex, death and money centring on a murderous reverend hunting for stolen money – is now regarded as one of the greatest American movies ever made, inspiring the likes of the Coen brothers, David Lynch and Terrence Malick with its dark themes and expressionist imagery.

Picture: Transferred from a 35mm fine grain positive made as part of the UCLA Film Archives Restoration (with additional work done in London by James

White's team at Deluxe), Arrow's AVC 1.66:1 1080p Blu-ray encode retains an authentically film-like appearance with plenty of grain throughout. Contrast levels are also spot on, painting the screen with deep, dark shadows and crisp white highlights. For a film of this vintage (it was made in 1955) it's highly impressive.

Audio: The clarity and depth of the disc's LPCM dual-mono track indicates that just as much work was put into restoring this aspect of the film as was put into buffing up the visuals. A DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is also included, which opens up the film's score a little more but – as you'd expect – doesn't really offer too much in the way of surround sound thrills. **Extras:** While it may not come close to rivalling the plethora of bonus features that Criterion included on



its 2010 US release, this Arrow Academy Blu-ray still offers up some choice extras.

The obvious highlight is *Charles* Laughton Directs The Night of the

Hunter, a mammoth 160-minute collection of outtakes and behind-the-scenes footage (including the unforgettable sight of Laughton slapping child actor Billy Chapin on the stomach to get him to register the right look of pain for a scene). Also included on the disc are an isolated LPCM dualmono 'Music and Effects' track, an interview with cinematographer Stanley Cortez and the trailer.

The accompanying booklet contains a trio of essays, contemporary reviews and information about the film's Blu-ray presentation.

HCC VERDICT

The Night of the Hunter

→ Arrow Academy → Region B BD

→ £23 Approx

WE SAY: Arrow has delivered a fine
hi-def package for one of the greatest

American movies ever made



Red River

Eureka: The Masters of Cinema Series Region B BD → £25 Approx



The Masters of Cinema Blu-ray range takes a welcome detour into the Wild West with this excellent hi-def outing for Howard Hawks' 1948 *Red River*. While there are a handful of

issues with regards to minor print anomalies and fluctuations in contrast, on the whole the AVC-encoded 1.33:1 1080p image stands up to scrutiny. Detailing is excellent in close-ups and the ever-present grain shows no sign of unwanted digital tampering. Our only real issue is the slightly limited nature of disc-based extras – an hour-long radio adaptation from 1949 and a 45-minute discussion of the film are all you get.



Convoy StudioCanal → Region B BD £23 Approx



It might not be one of the crown jewels in Sam Peckinpah's body of work (and that's putting it nicely) but his

trucker caper *Convoy* scrubs up just fine on Blu-ray. Indeed, StudioCanal deserves a big pat on the back for the work it has put into this release, starting with the immaculately restored AVC 2.35:11080p presentation of the movie. The audio has also been cleaned up, resulting in an accurate and well-rounded DTS-HD MA dual-mono mix. An excellent 70-minute documentary tops a pleasingly hefty collection of extras that also includes lost scenes and poster art. 10-4!



Robin Redbreast

BFI→R2 DVD £20 Approx



A companion piece of sorts to *The Wicker Man*, this provocative 1970 BBC *Play for Today* production is a creepy

piece of English Gothic focusing on folk rituals in an insular village. While it was originally shot in colour, the only surviving print is an off-air black-and-white 16mm telerecording, which served as the basis for this DVD release. Regardless of this the 1.33:1 transfer seems fine on a technical basis and the lack of colour isn't really that much of an issue. Extras take the form of an interview with screenwriter James Bowen and the 1937 archival short Around the Village Green.





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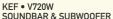
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SELECT

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TOP 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed



Samsung UE55F9000 → £3,300

After debuting with a £35,000 85in beast, Samsung enters the 'sensible' Ultra HD TV arena with an absolute star. This neat-looking 55incher offers superb upscaling of regular HD sources and immersive active 3D. *HCC* #226



Sony KDL-40W905A→£1,400 ★★★★★

Flaunting the brand's new Triluminos edge LED lighting, this set majors on a startling colour performance, plus crisp delineation and authentic black levels. Pricey, but worth it. HCC #222



Panasonic TX-P60ZT65→£3,800 ★★★★★

This plasma lives up to its 'Beyond Reference' billing, with the best 1080p picture in town – imagery is effortlessly cinematic. But at this price, you might want $4K...\ HCC\ #223$



Samsung PS64F8500→£3,000 ★★★★★

A new panel design has given Samsung's plasma tech a much needed injection of brightness and contrast. The result is a premium bigscreen display that constantly wows. HCC #221



Samsung UE46F8000 → £1.800 ★★★★

The F8000 tops Samsung's LED lineup (if you exclude the £35,000 S9 Ultra HD set) and is a consistently good performer. Bright, vivid images married to a super-stylish design. HCC #221



Panasonic TX-P42GT60→£1,150 ★★★★★

This mid-range plasma still carries much of the technology found on Panasonic's higher-end PDPs, and delivers finessed, film-friendly Full HD visuals. Not very stylish, though. HCC #226



Sony KDL-65X9005A→£6,000 ★★★★★

The first 'affordable' Ultra HD screen we've tested, Sony's 65in next-gen panel is a cracker, offering pin-sharp visuals and brilliant Passive 3D. Blacks aren't best-in-breed, though. HCC #224



Philips 55PFL8008→£2,500 ★★★★★

Philips' current flagship, this 55in sports a premium design and provides electrifying HD images. The Smart portal could be improved, however, and setup is fiddly. HCC #224



Samsung UEF406400 → £600 ★★★★

Supreme value for money is on offer here – Samsung's smartlooking 40-incher provides a brilliant blend of punchy HD pictures and welcome features. *HCC #227*



LG 50PA650T→£500 ★★★★

A 50in plasma TV for £500 is hard to ignore, and this LG rewards thrifty buyers with a solid performance. No 3D or Smart tech here – just bigscreen HD images and neat styling. HCC #219

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



Plasma or LCD?: The TV market is becoming increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 70ins are also hitting the high street – and 84in 4K panels are also on the way. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and a higher energy consumption. There's also a more limited choice – with just Samsung, LG and Panasonic selling plasma TVs in the UK.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba, Sony, and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 set currently on sale.

Top 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES



Fast & Furious 6: Extended Action Packed Edition

This is pure escapism on a cracking BD disc – the car acrobatics and rapid-fire fist-fights are delivered with pin-sharp 2.40:1 visuals and a precision-steered soundmix.

★★★★⋾



Oz: The Great and Powerful

Sam Raimi takes you back to Oz in this colour-laden fantasy that astonishes in its 3D guise. The sense of depth and immerision created here is hard to beat. Disney's 7.1 mix, meanwhile, is an absolute riot.



Brian de Palma's atmospheric and meticulously crafted thriller benefits from an HD restoration and a mountain of bonus material that will satiate fans. Be warned though: audio is LPCM stereo.





Oblivion

Joseph Kosinski follows up *Tron: Legacy* with another sci-fi flick that looks and sounds absolutely spectacular – so while the movie may seem a little short in terms of narrative scope, you still need to grab this disc.





Iron Man 3

This third outing for Robert Downey Jnr's superhero reignites the franchise, with director Shane Black injecting some wry humour into the mayhem. Walt Disney's Blu-ray doesn't disappoint in AV terms either.

TOP 10 **BLU-RAY PLAYERS**

All prices are approx and



Oppo BDP-103EU→£500 ★★★★★

Oppo's first deck for two years was worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs should you want to lavish some of its processing power on lesser components. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. All hail the new king of Blu! HCC #215

Sony BDP-S790→£240 ★★★★★

This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. HCC #210

Oppo BDP-105EU→£1,000 ★★★★★

This heavyweight deck builds on the premium picture performance of the BDP-103EU with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out. HCC #217

Marantz UD7007→£1.000 ★★★★★

Marantz's top-line player doesn't bother itself with feature fads like 4K upscaling, preferring to offer faultless BD playback, music streaming (including FLAC) and balanced outputs. HCC #220

Pioneer BDP-450→£230 ★★★★

An affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer. HCC #219

Denon DBT-3313UD→£900 ★★★★

As a 'transport', this universal deck lacks built-in decoders and analogue outs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded. HCC #217

Panasonic DMP-BDT500 →£300 ★★★★

Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricksy, though. HCC #208

Sony BDP-S5100 → £140 ★★★★

Smaller than many BD decks, Sony's 'Sense of Quartz'-styled spinner offers SACD compatibility and plenty of VOD content. The menu system needs streamlining, though. HCC #222

Panasonic DMP-BDT330→£200 ★★★★

New for 2013, this slim-line spinner is a solid choice, although the Viera Connect portal is beginning to feel a bit out-dated and the DMP-BDT500 (above) offers better features. HCC #221

Pioneer BDP-160 → £130 ★★★★

The successor to the BDP-150 adds integrated Wi-Fi, making media file playback simpler. The Smart hub is still practically empty, but SACD support softens the blow. HCC #227

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others, of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMIequipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channeling audio to your receiver amp, the othe piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation 3?: Sony's console ushered in the era of Blu-ray playback in 2006 and still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice - especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joypad is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most BD spinners. The PS4 is on the way soon, too.



DEMO DELIGHT

Ridley Scott's return to the a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it



Top 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx



Sony VPL-HW50ES → £3,000

Another compelling example of Sony's rediscovered obsession with quality and a model that no one in the market for a mid-range projector can afford to ignore. Your film collecton is in safe hands here. HCC #216



JVC X55→£5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more flexible, second iteration of JVC's e-shift pixel-polishing wizardry, the X55 offers supreme clarity as well as impressive contrast and near-faultless 3D presentation. HCC #219



JVC X35→£2,900 ★★★★

The £3,000 price point is a hot spot for home cinema PJs, and JVC's 'entry-level' D-ILA model is worth auditioning – especially if you're not fussed about its '4K' scaling siblings. HCC #218



Sony VPL-VW1000ES→£17,000 ★★★★★

Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so! HCC #209



SIM2 Super Lumis→£37,000 ★★★★

With a more potent lamp than its Lumis forebear, this new light-cannon from SIM2 costs an arm and leg, and is only Full HD, but delivers an astonishing level of performance. HCC #227



JVC X75→£6,500 ★★★★★

This offers an increased contrast over its DLA-X55 stablemate plus greater calibration options. It's a better performer, too, but whether it's worth the extra outlay is your decision. HCC #225



Epson EH-TW8100→£2,300 ★★★★

Don't want the ISF certification, 3D glasses or wireless HD transmission of the EH-TW9100W? Then save youself £600 and grab this well-priced offering instead. HCC #218



Panasonic PT-AT6000E→£2.900 ★★★★

Panasonic's PJ is a brilliant performer with 2D, but 3D movies could do with an increase in brightness. Maybe that's why you don't get any 3D spex bundled in the box... HCC #215



Optoma HD25→£800 ★★★★

Optoma's newest projector provides bright, stable Full HD 3D (with the Active glasses and RF transmitter included) and great-looking 2D visuals for a pittance. A bit noisy. HCC #220



BenQ W1070 →£700 ★★★★

A brilliant bargain proposition, the BenQ W1070 packs a surprising amount of useful features, including ISF certfication. You'll need to fork out extra for 3D glasses, though. HCC #220

Tech Info: Projectors



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be guite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.



Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx d may have changed



KEF R Series 7.1 → £6,500

A 7.1 array mixing both dipolar and direct radiating surrounds, this authorative package takes its cues from KEF's Blade concept speaker and offers faultless, largescale, home cinema sonics. HCC #217



Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D→£2,000 ★★★★★

This 5.1 set sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PVID subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too. HCC #212



O Acoustics O2000i→£600 ★★★★★

Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at C Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub. HCC #211



Wharfedale Diamond 100 HCP→£950 ★★★★★

Yet another excellent affordable package from Wharfedale, the Diamond 100 HCP offers a sound quality beyond what you might expect from its sub-£1,000 ticket. Maturely styled. HCC #224



M&K Sound S150 MkII → £7,150 ★★★★

A no-nonsense 5.1 package with Hollywood heritage and THX Ultra2 certification, this is all about uncoloured, deeply detailed audio rather than flashy aesthetics. HCC #225



Acoustic Energy 3 Series 5.1→£2,000 ★★★★

An easy-to-accommodate system using bookshelfs both front and rear, this brilliantly built array creates a musical, cohesive soundfield backed up by an agile subwoofer. HCC #220



DALI Epicon 5.1 → £17,000 ★★★★★

Not a cheap option, but buyers of this DALI package are rewarded by a sublime performance. Music and movies benefit from high-end proprietary tech; build quality is fantastic. HCC #222



Tannoy Precision Series 5.1 →£4,450 ★★★★★

These speakers' classic look belies the brand's hi-fi heritage, but this multichannel setup works wonders with movies, too – a rich, large and dynamic sound is on offer. HCC #226



Monitor Audio MASS 5.1→£800 ★★★★

Five satellite speakers joined by a potent (and quite large) 220W subwoofer, MA's MASS 5.1 delivers detailed surround sonics and enough grunt for regular-sized rooms. HCC #217



KEF E305 5.1→£900 ★★★★★

The living room-friendly looks of KEF's newest set of 'eggs' will ensure they get a lot of fans, and sound quality, courtesy of the brand's Uni-Q driver array, is superb. HCC #222

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 arrav.

DEMO DELIGHT

oomph of your sub that impresses friends and family, the high-frequency poise of your speakers is equally important, lending authenticity to the copious Foley effects that litter film soundtracks. The Colosseum fight sequence in *Gladiator*, with its clashing swords, is a perfect test for your tweeters



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TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS/POWER AMPLIFIERS

All prices are approx



Denon AVR-4520 → £2,300 ★★★★

Denon's flagship AVR sees the brand return to the high-end in style. This 9.2-channel powerhouse mixes subtlety and detailing with brute force and dynamism. Build quality is high and its networking talents impressive. HCC #218



Sony STR-DA5800ES → £2,200 ★★★★

Sony's follow up to the STR-DA5700ES continues to pack handy features (built-in Ethernet switching, VOD), ups the channels to 9.2, and brings a suite of great post-processing modes. HCC #223



Arcam AVR750→£4,000 ★★★★★

If all you want from an AV receiver is vast power and effortless performance, this high-end 7.1-channel beast is tailored to you. Little bonus features beyond audio networking. *HCC* #225



Krell Foundation →£6.500 ★★★★★

One of the US marque's more affordable offerings, the Foundation is a seven-channel processor that delivers an insightful, smooth and epic sound. And it looks fab. HCC #224



Marantz AV8801→£2,500 ★★★★

The brand's high-end 11-channel processor offers balanced outputs and heavyweight engineering. Partner it with the MM8807 power amp for a supreme performance. HCC #220



Pioneer SC-LX86→£2,000 ★★★★★

As the Japanese corp's top dog, the SC-LX86 is packed with features and built to last. Get to grips with its detailed setup process and you're in for multichannel thrills. HCC #217



Onkyo TX-NR626→£400 ★★★★★

Packing both Bluetooth and Wi-Fi (without the need for optional dongles) means this affordable Onkyo is ideal for network audio. Multichannel delivery is energetic, if a little brash. *HCC* #226



Denon AVR-X4000→£1,200 ★★★★

A revamped GUI makes the AVR-X4000 pretty on the eye, but it's still not a fool-proof user experience. Sonically it's assured and the media streaming side is hard to fault. HCC #226



Harman Kardon AVR 370→£800 ★★★★

One of the most sultry-looking models on the market, HK's mid-ranger offers 8-in, 2-out HDMI hookup, AirPlay and a classy audio performance. The app and UI could be better. HCC #219



Yamaha RX-V675→£500 ★★★★

The new low/mid-range RX-V675 digs out all the sonic details of your Blu-ray platters and places them across the soundstage. A great-sounding AVR at a good price. Primitive UI. HCC #225

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X postprocessing - possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (picured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V671 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-Ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-Ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.



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Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed



Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250

Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers. HCC #197



The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3,000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these! HCC #214



The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet — using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too. HCC #208

Velodyne SPL-800 Ultra →£1,150 ★★★★

Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a br

Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a brilliant performance. The 8in driver is helped by a 1,200W amp and mic-assisted room EQ. Tight and fast. HCC #201



The T-7 uses an 8in driver in tandem with a 10in passive radiator, and features simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and Class A/B amplification. An excellent all-rounder. HCC #223

Bowers & Wilkins PV1D→£1,200 ★★★★★
On of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's

On of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's revamped PV1 uses DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class. HCC #212

Velodyne DD18+→£5,800 ★★★★★

If you have a large cinema room then this second-gen 18in beast from Velodyne will appeal. The performance is as brilliant as you'd expect for the price and specification. $HCC\ \#197$

REL G1→£3,300 ★★★★★

A top-of-the range woofer with a price tag to match, buyers of REL's G1 can rest assured they're getting a best-in-breed product. Delivers a warm, rich sound with slam and depth. HCC #208

SVS SB12-NSD→£650 ★★★★

A 12in driver squeezed into the smallest enclosure possible, the SB12-NSD packs a 400W 'Sledge' amp and offers a weighty yet fast and accurate sound. Looks a bit bland, though. HCC #223

Quadral Qube 10 →£525 ★★★★

A gorgeous-looking woofer with a build quality that belies its lowly price tag, the Qube 10 takes Quadral's musical heritage and delivers a controlled, poised performance. HCC #223

TECH INFO



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Flovd E Toole (his book Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferrable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

Oblivion: Joseph Kosinksi's sophomore sci-fiction flick looks spectacular on Blu-ray, and its visual panache is matched by a 7.1 audio mix that particularly impresses with its low-end extension. The subwoofer channel here is regularly employed, dropping deep and loud to accompany everything from explosions and weapons fire to the roaring engines of Tom Cruise's recon ship. Love your lows? Then love this.

TOP 5 HD GAMES



Injustice: Gods Among Us

A beat 'em up incorporating a bevy of DC Comics characters (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman et al) sounds like a great idea – and it is. Accessible to novices and suprisingly fun in the single-player mode. Pow!



Grid 2

Codemasters' sequel is the king of arcade racers, with the souped-up cars handling like a dream and the opposition's Al ensuring victories are well-earned. Photo-realistic vehicles and environments dazzle.



Grand Theft Auto V

Rockstar's newest slice of car-jacking, gun-wielding fun is absolutely massive in both scale and ambition – a big-budget game that will leave a big grin on your face. Graphically gorgeous, and the 5.1 mix isn't bad, either.



Dishonored

This first-person actionadventure puts you in the body of an assassin in a beautifully crafted steampunk world. Convincing characters and great sound design partnered with involving gameplay. We love it.



Tomb Raider

Lara Croft returns in this fantastic reboot that breathes new life into the third-person action genre. With a great story and quality graphics and sonic design it feels like a Hollywood blockbuster. Just with a joypad.

Top 10 ACCESSORIES All prices are approx and may have changed



Now TV box →£10 ★★★★

An unqualified bargain, this Wi-Fi VOD streamer from Sky (and built upon Roku hardware) brings BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and the Roku Channel Store to any HDMI-toting telly, plus subscription access to Sky Movies and Sky Sports. The quality of the adaptive bitrate streaming is impressive, and the £10 tag gets you P&P and an HDMI cable. HCC #226



Devolo dLAN 500 AV Wireless+→£130 ★★★★

Combining Powerline Ethernet distribution with integrated Wi-Fi, this starter kit is a great purchase if you're looking to extend and simplify your home network. HCC #222



Western Digital WD TV Live Hub→£200 ★★★★

The WD's 1TB hard drive explains the £200 ticket. This sleek-looking unit incorporates a faultless user interface and smartphone control, making media browsing a breeze. HCC #190



PSB M4U1→£220 ★★★★

These closed-back 'phones are excellent all-rounders — agile and clear with music, while possessing enough low-frequency prowess to give weight to BD soundtracks. Comfy, too. HCC #221



Crystal Acoustics Media Matchbox→£55 ★★★★

A dinky media player that will happily play nearly everything you throw at it, includig MKV, FLAC and BD/DVD ISO files. Pocket-sized, wallet-friendly and fuss free. HCC #202



Philips Hue→£180 ★★★★★

These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast. HCC #220



One For All Simple 4→£22 ★★★★

A neatly styled and backlit universal remote control, One For All's budget zapper can tackle up to four devices at once and offers easy setup and handy shortcut keys. HCC #220



Bang & Olufsen Beolit 12→£600 ★★★★

Pricey for an AirPlay speaker, but the performance and rugged build of B&O's semi-portable Beolit 12 justify the outlay; the onboard 120W amp delivers the goods. HCC #224



DVDO Air→£350 ★★★★

Built around the WiDi standard, this wireless HD sender handles Full HD (including 3D) video and multichannel audio. Build quality and design is good, performance hard to fault. HCC #214



Corsair Voyager Air→£180 ★★★★

A Wi-Fi-enabled portable hard drive (1TB), also with Ethernet, the smart-looking Voyager Air is an ideal partner for 'phone/ tablet users. No DLNA media server on board, though. HCC #223

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



What about my TV?: Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

Top 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS



Game of Thrones: The Complete Second Season

Another ten episodes of prime fantasy TV gets a spectacular Blu-ray release courtesy of HBO Home Entertainment – the picture and sound quality consistently impresses.



The Walking Dead: The Complete Third Season

The best series of zombie TV yet, this third run shuffles onto Blu-ray with authentic 1.78:1 HD imagery and atmospheric and spine-tingling DTS-HD MA sonics. Roll on S4.



Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection

Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of The Creature from the Black Lagoon in 3D.



Boardwalk Empire: Season Three

An interview with producer Martin Scorsese, plus commentary tracks and interactive viewing mode, round out a great-looking five-disc set for HBO's addictive crime drama.



The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: Extended Edition

Peter Jackson's box officebreaking trilogy simply dazzles in HD, and these extended cuts are perfect for Middle-earth maniacs. Watch the movies then savour the 26 hours of extras.



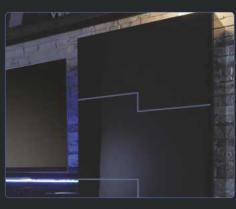


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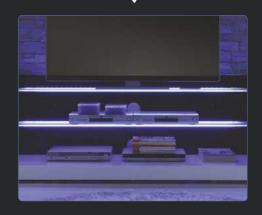
When you fork out for some serious media kit, you want it to look as well as sound good. Something with style and sophistication.

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*Product shown: VISION X2 - shown with additional wall shelf & remote control led RGB lights. Total price £1,475.00

Starscape Fibre Optic & LED Lighting



Growing numbers of professional home cinema installers in the UK are turning to Starscape for fibre optic and LED solutions. not to mention our professional customers in Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal, South Africa, the Czech Republic and South Africa.

Photo: Artcoustic SA and Sphere Custom Design

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Top 5 PVRs



Virgin Media TiVo, **£subscription**

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! - and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area





Sky+HD, £subscription

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies





Panasonic DMR-HW220. £250

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design





Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350

Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition



Samsung BD-F8500, £300

This 500GB model marries its Freeview+ PVR to a Wi-Fi-toting 3D Blu-ray player and offers copious catch-up TV options - it's just a shame they aren't integrated into the **FPG** environment



Top 5 SOUNDBARS



Yamaha YSP-3300, £900

A slender soundbar/sub duo that offers a very effective virtual surround performance courtesy of Yamaha's Beam driver tech. Connections include four HDMI inputs –but there's no Bluetooth here





Sonos PlayBar, £600

Sonos' debut 'bar offers a hefty, spacious sound (although it doesn't come with a sub) and it can be easily added to an existing Sonos network for music-on-demand fun. Only connects to your TV via optical





Orbitsound SB60, £300

Designed to slot underneath a TV's stand, this reasonably affordable 'bar offers a powerful, clear audio performance, but is rather old-fashioned in terms of connectivity and only suitable for screens up to 42in





Philips HTL9100, £600

A soundbar/sub that incorporates two removable side speakers to allow it to become a wireless 5.1 system, this Philips is a neat proposition. Easy to install and with a heavyweight sound





Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, £1,650

This second-generation soundbar offers no separate subwoofer and is hardly cheap, but B&W's audio expertise shows through, and HDMI hookup aids installation



Top 5 SYSTEMS



Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630

The use of new bamboo/ charcoal drivers and noiseshaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more) ****



Samsung HT-F9750W, £1.500

Samsung's flagship tallboy array uses a vacuum tube pre-amp and offers unique DTS Neo: Fusion seven-channel processing. Powerful, fulsome



sound; packed with features ****



Harman Kardon BDS470, £650

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration - 5.1 is also available



LG BH8220B, £650

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy ****



Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

HOMECINE Choice



Game on! Sony's PlayStation 4 ushers in a new era of home entertainment

2013 Movie Awards: We roundup the best Blu-ray and DVD releases of the last year

Best on test: The killer kit of 2013 revisited

ON TEST

Monitor Audio Radius 5.1 speakers Pioneer SC-LX87 AV receiver Outclass media server Humax HDR-2000T Freeview+ PVR KEF V Series soundbar PLUS News, software, opinion, installs and more!



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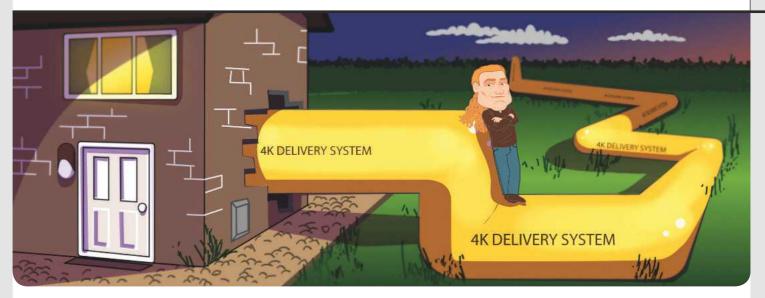
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122 OPINION



Point of View

Wondering if you should buy a 4K TV? **Richard Stevenson** reckons you'll own one sooner or later whether you like it or not – even if getting content could be a hard task

I AM LOVING the mainstream rhetoric and debate about 4K TV. Will it fly like HD or will it be a flop like 3D? Does the average TV buyer want or need 4K? Will the lack of good 4K content and suitable transport mechanisms render 4K a damp squib? Will those factors make all today's 4K TV purchases redundant and see the concept fade away? Er, no.

Forums and blogs are awash with mass-market consumers outraged at 'manufacturers trying to fleece us again' with high-priced technology, and Sunday paper pundits have suggested 4K will go the way of the dodo. Reasons cited include price, limited actual demand from consumers and lack of available content. Or rather lack of available content transport – there's a lot of 4K content out there, but the issue lies in getting it into your home.

Broadcast 4K over DTV is possible but not very practical as it demands a whole multiplex for just one channel, and 4K Blu-ray is certainly on the way but could have potential performance issues due to heavy video compression. Downloading content is clearly the way ahead, should you have a nice fat broadband pipe. Which, if you live outside of a major conurbation you won't (don't get me started!). You can clearly see why there is a bit of a 4K TV backlash going on, outside of the specialist press.

4K is coming. Just deal with it

However, 4K will become the *de facto* standard for largescreen TVs within five years anyway. While readers of this magazine will probably need little excuse to upgrade to a stonking 4K panel, even the nay-sayers and angry consumers will be going 4K eventually, like it or not. Just like Smart and 3D technologies, you will get 4K as a matter of course

on top-spec TVs. And, like all cutting-edge tech, it will quickly filter down to tomorrow's mass-market models.

The rosy outlook for 4K lies in the commercial necessity of the world's premier TV and panel manufacturers. Keeping their tech ahead of the second- and third-tier marques is an absolute necessity as they will be beaten in the market on a like-for-like price basis. These companies spend fortunes on R&D and if they hadn't been doing that for the last 50 years we would all still be looking at a 14in black-and-white CRT. Yes, top-tier models with top specifications will always cost more than unknown brands pushing older OEM technology, because those brands haven't had to amortise all that development cost and are using tech that the premium brands developed a few years ago.

So 4K will eventually pervade mainstream brands' ranges, and then move downmarket. But how quickly will it take off with consumers? Well, to draw an analogy, just look at the rise and rise of HDTVs. They had flooded the market long before Blu-ray or broadcast HD launched. Once panel production was up and running it became cost-effective by numbers, so brands opted for more HD models in the range than SD. Going back a bit, 'cos I'm old, the same can be said of the 16:9 ratio widescreen TV, launched by Philips well before there was any viable widescreen content. There is a definite air of 'if you build it they will come' about core television technologies.

All of which rather makes the debate on the future of 4K a completely moot point. It is going to happen, it will become the standard screen resolution, and it will do so really rather quickly

Are you waiting for content before going 4K? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com When 16:9 TVs were first launched, Richard Stevenson had a ponytail and too many AVRs. Nothing has changed since





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